INANIMATE FACT AND IRAQ WAR FILMMAKING

Unless you or someone you know is a member of the American armed forces, chances are high that your Iraq War experience has been an experience of media reception. You have seen colorful, highly sophisticated montage sequences of war imagery on television news networks; you have read newspaper and magazine articles whose contents are informed by editorial judgment, space restrictions, varying ideological preferences, etc.; and you have read blogs informed by the alchemical interactions of wit, rage, and legal stimulants. Yes, you have probably discussed the Iraq War with other people, but for them, too, all roads lead back to our news-media churn. For the vast majority of Americans, the Iraq War is an ongoing media event.

So, if you are someone with strong opinions about the war, it is probably worth considering the following: your opinions, and the actions which may follow from those opinions, are intimately bound up in your ability to seek out, absorb, synthesize, and filter media information. Your particular set of media-synthesizing skills could influence all kinds of important things. Like who you vote for on November 4th. Like what kinds of political affiliations you decide to make with other people. Like how you allocate your impressive but tragically non-infinite reserves of political energy. To put it crudely: the degree to which you are able to be an effective political person has a lot to do with whether or not you're good at watching TV.

This cuts both ways. Setting all withering cynicism aside for a moment, there are plenty of people in the business of generating media who are also interested in being effective, responsible, political people. Some of these people have made films about the Iraq War, and almost all of them have been failures. Some have been economic failures (*In the Valley of Elah*) and some have been artistic failures (*Rendition*). Some, like *Lions for Lambs*, have been both.

Lions for Lambs is the worst offender of the bunch, a sermonizing, condescending, leaden hunk of half-baked scoldings and lectures that may be so extravagantly bad as to merit a complete and urgent review of this whole Iraq War film thing: what on earth was Redford thinking? What prompted him to believe that declaiming "Rome is burning, son!" almost directly into the camera was anything resembling a good idea?

One needs to consider *both* the artistic and economic failures of Iraq War films in trying to answer this question. I want to suggest that these phenomena are related to one another, and that an explanation of this relationship has something to do with how everyday citizens made politics in the 1960s versus how their contemporary equivalents make politics in the 2000s. I think that the great, world-inverting media transformations of the last forty years—obviously, I'm mostly referring to the Internet here, but also to the more general proliferation of both print and video information outlets—have been accompanied by similar changes in how young, politically active types go out and make political activity. Those responsible for the failures of so many Iraq War films seem to have missed this second set of changes.

This is understandable, because the revolutionary protest politics of the 1960s are still, by and large, what the country thinks about when it tries to articulate something like "political activity" to itself. This means big groups of young people standing in big iconic places with large colorful signs yelling rhyming couplets at high volume. This means protests.

Importantly, these protests took place in front of crowds of yawning camera apertures which fed back to three—count 'em, three—network television stations. These three stations (ABC, CBS, NBC) served as the country's nexus of video media. If you wanted to see the sorts of politics that were happening around the country, you watched these network stations, just like everyone else did. If you wanted to make the sorts of politics that were happening around the country, you marched on Washington, just like everyone else did. These protests, as well as the era's great coups of investigative journalism, relied on a focused media audience, a well-defined public sphere. One knew that people were watching.

Yes, this is reductive. One was not absolutely required to watch the Big Three. There were any number of magazines to read, as well as an incredible diversity of sub-ideologies all clamoring for attention within the larger context of the massed angry thousands. But this alignment of huge manifestations of political energy and huge media institutions is important, because it is the world in which many of today's Iraq War filmmakers still imagine themselves to be working.

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Think of Gavin Hood's *Rendition*, in which mid-level CIA operative Douglas Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal) finally triumphs with a whistle-blowing phone call to the *Washington Post*. Freeman has borne witness to and participated in systematic human-rights violations, and the film's clear implication is that by phoning in the story he redeems himself and brings the operation to a screeching halt.

Problem is, we know that's not what happens. Jane Mayer had already blown that whistle in *The New Yorker* (February 14, 2005). We all knew about extraordinary rendition. It didn't help. In the protest era of political activity, when Seymour Hersh and Bernstein/Woodward were electrifying the country with accounts of massacres and cover-ups, it might have been easier to believe that action and change necessarily followed from a revelation of facts.

Today, facts aren't enough, and neither are large public manifestations of indignation and outrage, a.k.a. protests. Not only did the Iraq War protests fail to alter the course of the actual Iraq War in any way, they didn't significantly alter the way people talked about the impending conflict. "We respect the people's right to peacefully protest," administration officials said. Then they went about their business.

This was sad and bewildering for a lot of people. My guess is it's sad for these filmmakers as well, people with the best of intentions who hoped to turn the cineplex into a town hall and then watched helplessly as nobody showed up to the meeting. But people don't make their politics on a protest model anymore. The people I know who are most engaged are working on a smaller scale. They are moving to Mississippi to teach at poor public schools for a year or so; they are pulling together $10,000 on Facebook and heading off to Guatemala to build a school; they are working at non-profits that provide mental health services to veterans.

In other words, the great protests of the 1960s have dissolved into intricate, sparkling networks of social and political activity. Sort of like how the currents of information which used to all flow through the Big Three now route themselves through complex, ever-proliferating networks of information: newspaper websites which update by the minute, 5000 television stations, blogs blogs blogs.

And in this new media world, it turns out that facts are too easy to come by. They mass themselves and fly around at outrageous speeds, and before the hour is up everyone with an iMac knows everything there is to know.

This means that maybe filmmakers looking to take on the Iraq War don't need to spend their time listing the facts, nor do they need to spend their time trying to psych up an already-engaged audience. What they might do instead is offer new avenues of understanding. They might carefully gather up a few facts from the common pool and organize them in imaginative ways, show audiences what can be done with them. Because if there's one aspect of the Iraq War that I've perhaps felt most acutely, it's the horrible impotence of inanimate fact.

Makeshift Iraq

Full Battle Rattle. Courtesy Mile End Films. Photo: Tony Gerber.

Two recent films, I think, are trying to persuade the facts to tell us something useful. The first is David Simon's HBO mini-series *Generation Kill*, which in its initial episodes is already doing a thrilling job of mapping the intersections of individual experience and the power dynamics which structure the hierarchy of the U.S. military. It is the only work thus far that is really interested in *how* the Iraq War is being fought. The second, Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss's weird and moving documentary *Full Battle Rattle*, doesn't even take place in Iraq. Instead it follows a single battalion of U.S. soldiers through their training exercises at Medina Wasl, an Army-built "Iraqi" village in California's Mojave desert. Iraqi Americans pretend to be Iraqi civilians while battle-tested U.S. soldiers play Iraqi insurgents; all the while good old American civilians orchestrate chaos from some remote command center. In other words, the film upends, inverts, and explodes any notions you may have about the complex relationships between Americans and Iraqis. What's more, you can detect the filmmakers thinking all the while, reevaluating their premises, mulling over their own materials. Leaving the theater, I didn't have any answers to slip in my back pocket; but it was nice to finally have something other than the facts.

RICHARD BECK is an undergraduate student at Harvard University. He is from Wallingford, Pennsylvania.

AMONG OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Caetlin Benson-Allott writes about video distribution, exploitation and horror films, and queer theory. She teaches courses on gender and technology studies and new media history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is currently revising a book manuscript entitled *Imperio-Video: Motion Pictures, Spectatorship, and the Politics of New Media.*

Ernest Callenbach, founding editor of *Film Quarterly*, also edited film books and the Natural History Guides series at University of California Press. On the side he wrote a futurist novel, *Ecotopia* (Bantam edition, 1990), which has sold almost a million copies in nine languages, and its prequel, *Ecotopia Emerging* (Heyday Books, 1981). He is also the author of *Ecology: A Pocket Guide* (University of California Press, 1998).

Lalitha Gopalan is the author of *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (BFI Publishing, 2002) and *Bombay* (BFI Modern Classics, 2005). She is the editor of *24 Frames: Indian Cinema* (Wallflower Press, forthcoming 2008).

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith is Senior Research Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London. A former editor of *Screen*, translator of Gramsci, and teacher of film studies in the U.K. and U.S., he is writing a history of the British Film Institute, where he was, from 1978–89, successively Head of Education and Head of Publishing. He is the author of *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s* (Continuum, 2008).

James S. Williams is the author of *Jean Cocteau* (Manchester University Press, 2006) and co-editor of *Gender and French Cinema* (Berg, 2001), *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000* (Amsterdam University Press, 2000), *For Ever Godard* (Black Dog Publishing, 2004), and *Jean-Luc Godard: Documents* (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2006), catalog of the Pompidou's exhibition *Voyage(s) en Utopie.*

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ON LOOKING BACK

In the fall of 1958, fifty years ago, the inaugural issue of *Film Quarterly* was published, and it is fascinating to revisit those first years, when the European New Wave cinemas generated a scintillating critical energy in a pioneer magazine. Antonioni proved to be particularly galvanizing; almost the entire fall 1962 issue was given over to Ian Cameron's fifty-eight-page study of the filmmaker's work. "Antonioni's role in the cinema seems to me a fundamental one," wrote Ernest Callenbach, introducing the feature, though not a party line. *Film Quarterly* embraced contesting views, as with two notable contributors' opinions on *L'eclisse* (which furnishes our 200th cover image). Stanley Kauffmann was enthusiastic: "Antonioni's splaying open of an environment and his frenzied ballet of the Roman stock exchange are matters possible only to a master." Dwight Macdonald disagreed: "*The Eclipse* was a self-indulgent display of his weaknesses." Assessments of *Rocco and His Brothers* were if anything still more divergent. Cynthia Grenier pronounced it "superb," but Vernon Young, emphatically offended by its homoeroticism, confessed to feeling "in my soul *nauseated* by what reaches me as a perversion of humanity." In this anniversary issue, founding editor Callenbach recalls *Film Quarterly*'s origins and traces the development of its agenda; James S. Williams argues that Antonioni's cinema opened up whole "new spaces of thought and being"; while D. A. Miller reconsiders Visconti's epic melodrama and its strange "larval beauty."

The initial readers of *Film Quarterly* would probably have guessed on the basis of *L'avventura* alone that its director would have a career worthy of in-depth posthumous consideration. But could they have imagined that, as Williams tells us, Antonioni's 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo Cina* is now easily accessible only on YouTube (in twenty-one separate clips); or that some of us watch movies, having perhaps first downloaded them, on computers or handheld media devices—and maybe movies made out of numbers rather than by traditional photographic means? Who at that time could have dreamed up De Palma's *Redacted*, which Ken Provencher analyzes, with its mock-ups of online Iraq War snuff videos? Or foreseen that Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*, one half of the unrecoverable *Grindhouse* double bill, would use digital special effects to create not only a pastiche of 1970s exploitation cinema, but also a simulacrum of celluloid battered by the increasingly nonexistent physical toll of theatrical projection? (Caetlin Benson-Allott's essay on *Grindhouse* is the winner of our commemorative competition.)

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As it did on *Film Quarterly*'s tenth anniversary, war looms over the proceedings. The Iraq War has been inescapable in recent English-language cinema; it has sometimes seemed to seep in everywhere, including *Paranoid Park*, which Megan Ratner calls a "home front" film. Among this multitude of films, there have been uncanny-seeming connections along with the more obvious ones. For example, a man's body is severed at the waist in both *Paranoid Park* and Nick Broomfield's Iraq docudrama, *Battle for Haditha*. Did Broomfield and Gus Van Sant confer? It seems more likely that the idea of extreme violence is pervasive at the moment, leading filmmakers independently toward similar images of catastrophic injury.

As De Palma's does too, Broomfield's film takes as a theme the ways in which combat-zone bloodshed is visualized. In one scene, a U.S. officer orders a smart-missile attack which he then views remotely on a monitor. There is just a haze of smoke where a man had been walking. Afterwards a marine who will eventually permit a massacre asks his commander for a doctor's appointment because he cannot sleep, disturbed by "bad dreams, shit I've seen." The repeated staging of evisceration seems to me like one such bad dream, but the force of both *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha* comes from

Surveillance seen

The Power of Nightmares. © 2004 BBC. DVD: Wholphin.

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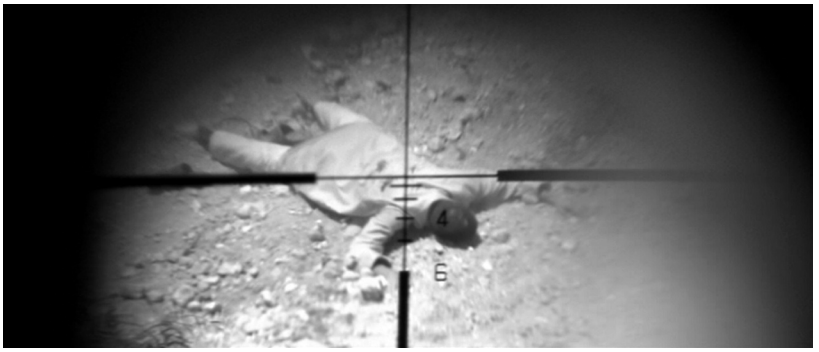

Death in view

Top: *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma.* © 1976 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. DVD: BFI (U.K.). Bottom: *Battle of Haditha.* © 2007 Lafayette Film. DVD: Contender (U.K.).

the acknowledgment that when death is observed through a gun sight, on a camcorder display or a command-and-control video feed—and moreover when it is viewed in fictive recreations of battlefield atrocities—it may often not seem like a real event so much as a blur, or a dream that is not actually bad enough to remember.

Thinking about these issues of technology and vision, I could not shake another image, also strikingly relevant to the present moment: a man looking into camera through binoculars. It occurs in *Battle for Haditha*, when an Iraqi insurgent on a minaret balcony watches the mayhem caused by the bomb he has detonated. I spotted it again in the newsreel and found-footage opening sequence of Adam Curtis's BBC series, *The Power of Nightmares* (as Ben Walters notes, this series might be little-known but for Internet availability). This watcher appears to be in uniform and is only briefly glimpsed in a dense montage of clips: politicians, jihadis, a character in *The Thief of Baghdad*, TV reporters, even an owl, all staring back from the screen to illustrate Curtis's theory of contemporary ideological delirium: "The neoconservatives began to reconstruct the Islamists. They created a phantom enemy and as this nightmare fantasy began to spread, politicians realized the new power it gave them in a deeply disillusioned age. Those with the darkest nightmares became the most powerful." (Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mark Sinker also explore Curtis's work.) Then I remembered the closing sequence of one more groundbreaking Italian film, Pasolini's *Salò*, reissued on DVD this season by Criterion. In horrifying repose, their vantage position an elegant chair that weirdly seems to hood them, the Fascist torturers take turns to gaze at their victims' torment.

These nearly identical images have varying kinds of impact in their original contexts. In *Salò*, a cold diagram of monstrous cruelty is being drawn; in *Battle of Haditha*, the character with the binoculars is expressing remorse for his actions; and in *The Power of Nightmares*, the shot counterpoints a series of faces that are mostly abashed or blank—as if to remind us that we may just as easily stare stupidly or inattentively as with fury or desire. This has a bearing on the challenge of the self-reflexive Iraq films. If we do not close our eyes or flinch, then we have to look back and learn something from them. The degree of active attention we bring to movies, and especially to those images which are discomfiting, tyrannizing, or perplexing—"great care must be taken not to simply bore the audience by the too vivid re-creation of boredom," wrote *Film Quarterly*'s 1960 Cannes reporter of *L'avventura*—is a political matter, and furthermore one continuing measure of the intellectual mettle of a newly quinquagenarian journal.

Rob White

WORK AND THE CITY

Given that every audience member knew Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) in *The Devil Wears Prada* was a cinematic merkin for *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour, it was passing strange that Streep played the role as Martha Stewart. The coif, the voice, even the late-blooming fragility.

This curiosity would have been forgotten but for Carrie Bradshaw's telegraphic visit with her boss in the film version of *Sex and the City*. Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) also works for *Vogue*; in this version of New York's media fantasia, the editor is named Enid Frick and played by Candice Bergen. With her Connecticut matrician manner and überblond 'do, Bergen looks—despite couture caftan—like yet another Martha Stewart. Fashion industry movies seem haunted by the *prêt-à-porter* doyenne who made a mini-empire out of the domestic work they so fervently disavow.

The blind spot of work dominates *Sex and the City*. The brief sequence with Editor Enid points up one of the most salient features of both series and movie: the lives of stunning leisure led by Carrie, Charlotte (Kristin Davis), Samantha (Kim Cattrall), and purported lawyer Miranda (Cynthia Nixon). Even domestic chores are beyond them; Carrie, with more free time than a pasha, has to hire an assistant to help her move apartments. Confronted with the concept of cooking, she offers, "I keep sweaters in my stove!" The effect is bizarre in the extreme, an upside-down world no one bothers to explain. So far does it exceeed Hollywood's garden-variety leisure porn that any sign of labor cracks the screen. In one scene from the film, as the camera ventures into a walk-in closet to linger on the military definition of Parker's bicep, there is little to think but, "Well, at least she works *out*."

HBO's reverse image is *Entourage*, approaching its fifth season. It as well features four friends on the make in the metropolis, burdened by sexual frankness and bad dialogue; perhaps because it is written for boys rather than girls, *Entourage* is set relentlessly in the world of work. The leads are always at work even when they're not: closing deals on the ubiquitous smartphones, angling for the next gig at parties, and so forth. This is underscored by an entire episode (39, season 3) in which the law of the Sabbath is flouted hyperbolically and systematically. Work trumps everything. Sex is distraction, perk, conflict of interest—it orbits the matter of work in *Entourage* as surely as it orbits the matter of marriage in *Sex and the City*. For all that, the gang's ceaseless toil is in Hollywood, making movies and television shows. It's scarcely lost on viewers, one trusts, that they're watching meta-work: a glossy reflection of the work of watching the show.

The Hills is an even more interesting inversion. The quasi-reality show, just starting its fourth season on MTV, has taken its share of critical drubbings. Monotone Lauren Conrad, having graduated from earlier series *Laguna Beach*, moves to Los Angeles to continue her life of communicating via exaggerated facial expressions, of which she possesses three. She and her friends negotiate jobs, nightclub parties, romantic and social relationships, all spliced into editorially contrived narrative arcs. None distinguishes herself as particularly charming, intelligent, or likable. The guys are worse. Models are involved. They aren't appealing either. The whole thing is fantastic.

This may be because the show is nothing other than *Sex and the City* set on its feet. Lauren and her girlfriends have more or less the same interests as the New York quartet, the same purely propositional character differences. They've come to the city in search of "The two Ls: labels and love," as Carrie says. The fellows serve only to swell a progress, start a scene or two. And for most of the series so far, Lauren and her friend Whitney work at—of course—*Teen Vogue* (where their boss doesn't look especially high fashion, but she does look just like a magazine editor). When the editor dispatches them to New York, the episode is called "Stress and the City."

The only substantial difference between the shows is that, over and over, the young women of *The Hills* go to their jobs.

All play

Sex and the City. © 2008 New Line Cinema. Photo: Craig Blankenhorn/New Line Cinema.

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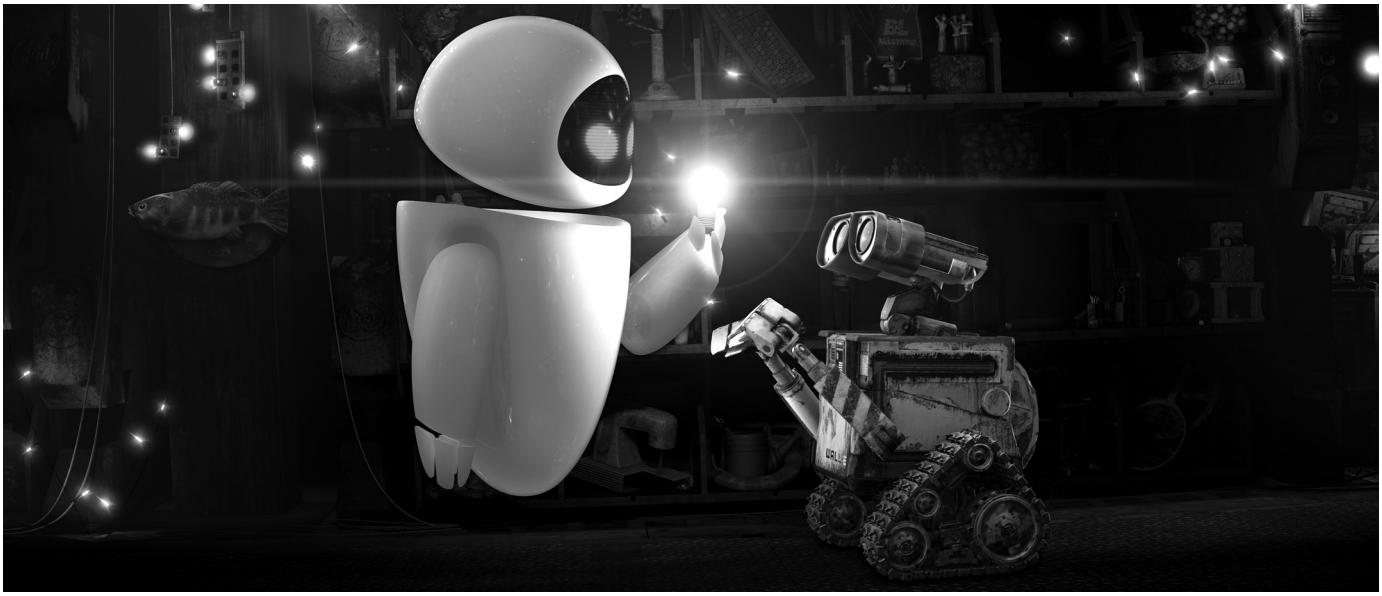

Love among the working class

WALL-E. © Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios.

This is a ludicrously glam drag, slinking around for glossy mags and party promoters, jetting off to Paris to intern at a costume ball. Strangely inert drama ensues. Compared to *Sex and the City*, it's practically social realism. They sit at their desks having flattened conversations, or in hotel rooms discussing that day's work, or tomorrow's. Characters are forced to relocate, to choose repeatedly between love and work (just like the men in *Sex and the City*, whose work lives we never see).

Nothing quite succeeds in being terrifying or exhilarating, though everything is supposed to be. The inertia is part of the show's pleasure, its untouchable-yet-inescapable feeling—a ceaseless celebration driven by compulsion rather than pleasure. Is that not work? In its very lifelessness, *The Hills* is the most lifelike reality show yet. In the latest development, Whitney and Lauren leave *Teen Vogue* to land at a PR firm that handles fashion; they may have to move to New York. At which point, one can only assume, they will meet Carrie, perhaps at the gym.

Repetitive, dull urban work—hauling trash, scrubbing floors, tending to growing things—must be happening somewhere. In fact it's being done in another summer movie. By robots. This is the somewhat spare framework for *WALL-E*. One robot, EVE, has returned to an abandoned Earth to search for vegetation in the dump of a twenty-eighth-century crypto-New York. The city's lone occupant (excepting a cockroach) is the title character, a Chaplinesque workerbot patiently rebuilding the city's crumbled skyline with cubes of trash. Long-gone humanity floats through space on a never-ending leisure cruise.

As an animated ecological fable, it's a bit of a drag, though we've come a way since *FernGully: The Last Rainforest*. Thankfully, *WALL-E* is not directed by Pixar ace Brad Bird, and so does not offer his single numbing idea: that there should be no social restraints of any kind, lest true excellence be kept from its destiny (this column grimly awaits Bird's epic masterpiece, *Neoliberalism! The Cartoon*).

Director Andrew Stanton, who made *Finding Nemo*, has a broader emotional palette. In the *New York Times*, he recalled the germ of the film thusly: "What if humanity left and some little robot got left on and kept doing the same thing forever?" This somehow sets the terms for an arresting love story. They have a first date, with flirtations and misunderstandings and a sweet investigation into the life of things, ending with a Zippo lighter. And then, being things themselves, they go back to work (later, we'll see the mopping robot M-O break free of his programmed chains so that he can clean even more; he loves his work).

It turns out that love itself is a kind of work, for which WALL-E's job has prepared him. When EVE goes into a catatonic mode to nurture a lone sprout of green, WALL-E laboriously shelters her, a sped-up daily grind (love ye well whoever watches over you when you're in a coma). This should have been the movie, and for the most part it is. When the humans return, it seems beside the point; who cares about them anymore? What if humanity stuck around, and some little robot *still* had to keep doing the same thing forever? That would be just like labor is now, one supposes. Love, it turns out, is no longer the domain of humans, but of whoever does the work around here.

JOSHUA CLOVER blogs at janedark.com.

THE RISE AND FALL OF FILM CRITICISM

When the editor told me that this was *Film Quarterly*'s fiftieth anniversary issue I was surprised—surprised not that the magazine had been going so long, but that it was not in fact even older. When I first encountered *Film Quarterly* in the mid-1960s it seemed to me a very established magazine, indeed positively Establishment, an impression that was reinforced by its volume numbers, which were in the high teens. It was only later that I discovered that it had inherited the numbering from its previous incarnation as the *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*. As for the Establishment quality, this was due, in my eyes, to the fact that it had not fully embraced the revolution in film writing brought about *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Movie*, represented in the U.S. by Andrew Sarris who wrote in another magazine, the New York-based *Film Culture*.

It seems to me now that it was more than just the numbering that had me confused. At its foundation, or refoundation, in 1958, *Film Quarterly* was ahead of the game. It was staking a claim for film criticism in what seemed a hostile climate but one which was about to change. *Oxford Opinion* (1960) and *Movie* (1962 onwards) were part of the change, as were a plethora of short-lived magazines—*Definition* (1960), *Motion* (1961), *Moviegoer* (1964), to name but three—which took the cinema seriously in a way it had not been taken seriously in the 1950s. And behind the changes in writing on the cinema there were changes in the cinema itself, of which the French New Wave was the principal exemplar. Although new writing, in *Cahiers* for example, helped call forth a new cinema, it was more generally new cinema that called for a new writing, and *Film Quarterly* was a precocious response to the arrival of this cinema.

What was the state of film criticism in English-speaking countries in the 1950s? Basically, there wasn't any. There were writers (Manny Farber, Parker Tyler, for example) but there were few outlets for sustained critical writing in books, magazines, or newspapers. Instead there was reviewing—lots of it. Editors thought that what readers wanted was reviews, something to tell them what was going on and what they might yet be lucky enough to get to see if they lived in the right place. But the kind of criticism that involved writing at length about a work which the reader already knew and about which he or she already had an opinion so that the two opinions, the reviewer's and the reader's, could be confronted—criticism of that sort hardly existed. Reviewers could pontificate, safe in the knowledge that however little they knew of what they were talking about, their readers knew even less. And if readers did decide to go to that Bergman movie in spite of the dismissive review of it in the London *Observer* or the *New York Times*, and liked it when they got there, there was little they could then do except shrug their shoulders and vow not to trust the reviewer in the future.

Then *Breathless* came out, and *L'avventura*. Reviewers struggled to cope. They saw that the films were original and sometimes even liked them. But they could not say why. They sensed that these films broke the rules, but they didn't know what the rules were that the films had so rudely broken. Also, although they were judgmental (which is what they were paid to be), they didn't necessarily have any judgment. Either they had internalized the presumed judgments of their readers or they had made such a career out of sounding off in a judgmental manner that they had lost the reflective ability to work out what their judgments were founded on. Meanwhile *Breathless* and *L'avventura* were drawing unexpectedly large audiences and a realization was dawning that more mainstream films—Westerns, for example, or domestic dramas—had more going for them than received opinion allowed for.

What was evident in this situation was a need for criticism to help illuminate these films, both the rule-defying ones and the ones that played by the rules, but also a debate as to what sort of animal this criticism should be. There was a lot of debate, between rival magazines rather than inside any one of them. (By publishing Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris, followed by a response from the editors of *Movie*, over three successive issues in 1963, *Film Quarterly* proved more open to dialogue than most.) The debates were not designed to produce consensus but out of them a sort of consensus did

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THE FUTURE OF FILM CRITICISM

Please contact Rob White
(fq.submissions@gmail.com)
if you are interested in contributing
1800 words on this topic.

emerge, to the effect that criticism was not the same as opinion, that it needed to be knowledgeable and precise, but that at the end of the day it was necessarily subjective, though for reasons which were not easy to define. Had people at the time been in the habit of reading Kant they might have found some reasons in the necessary indeterminacy of aesthetic concepts, but the nearest thing to a Kantian reasoning came in an article by Ian Jarvie in *Film Quarterly* (spring 1961) with the curious title "Towards an Objective Film Criticism," which argued, not in fact for objectivity, but for a level of intersubjective consent to critical propositions based on the scrupulous presentation of more-or-less verifiable evidence.

The 1960s, then, saw the opening up of a space for a film-critical practice respectful of the object under discussion but recognized to be based, in the last analysis, on intuition originating with an individual writer but shareable by that writer's readers. If I had to choose two essays which best embodied that practice they would probably be Susan Sontag on Bergman's *Persona* in *Sight and Sound* (autumn 1967), and Robin Wood on Makavejev's *Man Is Not a Bird* in a book called *Second Wave* (Studio Vista, 1970), but there were plenty of films around at the time deserving of sensitive critical treatment and more than a few writers capable of providing it.

Predictably, however, this combination of sensitivity and Kantian *sensus communis* did not find favor among the new-guard Marxists post-1968. Film writing, we argued (for I was one of them), needed to produce knowledge, and criticism as generally understood did not produce knowledge but wallowed around in a pool of bourgeois subjectivism, fetishizing both the auteur whose work was being discussed and the sensitive individual who did the discussing. The attack on the practice of film criticism in the pages of *Screen* in the early 1970s was part of a political project which I would still defend, but its sequel, the academicization of film studies, was unforeseen and in many ways a disaster. Academic film studies brought with it a vastly superior film historiography, including the history of film styles. But it nearly killed film criticism. The new knowledge-producing writing soon invaded places previously renowned for the more traditional practice of film criticism. A classic example of this would be Nick Browne's seminal "The Spectator-in-the-Text: the Rhetoric of 'Stagecoach'" in the winter 1975–76 *Film Quarterly*, which for good reason became a staple on countless film courses in the 1980s and 90s. Having frequently used it myself with students, I am immensely grateful for its existence, even if I now think its argument is flawed. Without patient analysis of the type applied by Browne to *Stagecoach*, the serious teaching of film study would be impossible. But we are faced here with a double danger. On the one hand, the intellectual discoveries of the 1970s have become the mechanical protocols of today, and on the other hand the pedagogic requirement of reproducing these protocols has squeezed out more adventurous forms of writing that aim to satisfy wider intellectual needs than those of the classroom.

Academic film writing these days lays great stress on the verifiable and generalizable. It also prefers ordinary films to unusual films because statements about them are more easily fitted into the verification-and-generalization box. (Unusual films can then be fitted into another box called "exceptions.") Meanwhile the coverage of cinema in the press (including some film magazines) has reverted to a mixture of snap-judgment reviewing and celebrity gossip. In between there is once again little space for film criticism as I understand the term. What I mean by criticism is a form of writing applied to works of art which pursues the general through the particular and is not ashamed to be subjective in its choice of particulars and in the generalizations it hazards on the basis of that choice; a form of writing in which the author is prepared to say, "I have seen this, you may not. You may have seen something different, or nothing at all, and now that I have told you what I have seen, you are free to accept my version or not as you think fit, because at the end of the day the case cannot be proved in anyone's favor." Criticism in this sense is a journey without maps and its justification lies in the fact that the terrain it crosses is one which can never be fully known but only observed, experienced, and reported on scrupulously and yet with imagination.

The assumptions behind this claim are two. First, that the work of the work of art (so to speak) is not necessarily to produce knowledge and the work of the worker on the work of art (the critic) is not necessarily to produce knowledge either, at least not in a scientific sense. Indeed the better the work of art the more likely it is to defy attempts to pin it down with the aid of reliable formulae. And secondly, that this is not a reason for refusing to say something just because what one has to say does not fit some pseudo-scientific criterion for knowledge production. On the contrary, the process of accompanying the work into this dangerous terrain and coming to terms with the hazards it presents—even at the cost of making unverifiable assertions—is more valuable than pootling about in the safe territory of the writer's suburban garden where every flower is what they said it was when you bought it from the shop.

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH's new book is *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s* (Continuum, 2008)

ROCCO AND HIS BROTHERS

I

Why this new Masters of Cinema (MOC) edition of Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* was undertaken—what necessity or desire it was intended to meet—an oracle alone could tell us. The image, though anamorphically well-proportioned, is hardly different from the 2003 Medusa edition, and even most of MOC's "new, improved" subtitles come from that edition. When these *are* new—and turn, say, a character's "weakness" for boxers into his "generosity" toward them, or send us looking for an invisible "picture" of San Rocco while the statue of him sits in plain view—their prudery and ignorance only resume *Rocco*'s dismal history of censorship. Perhaps not everything about the original should be restored, and certainly not, in *Rocco*'s case, the superannuated conceptual framing that MOC has also salvaged for the accompanying booklet. The latter consists—exclusively—of texts written around the time of *Rocco*'s release by Visconti and his intellectual champion and fellow party member Guido Aristarco. These enlist *Rocco* under the banner of political and artistic traditions then regarded as progressive. Visconti invokes Gramsci's "Notes on the Southern Question," to which *Rocco* would give narrative form, while Aristarco sees the film as continuing not only the left-leaning neo-realism of post-war Italian cinema, but also the explicitly proto-Marxist "critical realism" that Georg Lukács finds in the nineteenth-century European novel.

In 1960, it perhaps required such a pedigree to persuade the Italian cultural Left of *Rocco*'s merit. To many of its first spectators, Visconti's great work seemed morbidly afflicted with melancholy, and this condition had to be neutralized, as by an antitoxin, with vigorous insistence on the film's "optimism of the will" (Visconti) and "presentiment of a great transformation to come" (Aristarco), which, appearances to the contrary, made it acceptably inspirational. But such affirmation, disingenuous even in *Rocco*'s original marketing, becomes sheer mystification when reintroduced as the default setting for viewing *Rocco* now. The film's political value today might be said to lie, if anywhere, in the extreme formal clarity with which its melancholy prevents its dialectic from being more than notional. Unrecognized and even ruled out by Visconti's dutifully hopeful script, this melancholy survives in those appearances to the contrary which are, precisely, the images themselves.

If we started from these images rather than the script, we would see at once, for instance, that *Rocco* is simply too beautiful to be a neo-realist film. No doubt, the story—of a transplanted southern Italian family in Milan—takes place in that poor and lowly social realm which is neo-realist territory par excellence; in addition, it deploys practically the whole set of neo-realist stereotypes from the virtuous man and the chthonic mother to the creepy homosexual and the child redeemer—only the dog is absent. But the images egregiously violate neo-realism's two chief visual canons: ordinary-looking people and natural lighting. *Rocco*'s beauty—distracting indeed—pulls us away from both conventions. To begin with the first of these, no one can pretend for a moment that Rocco Parondi, country boy and world-class boxer, looks like anything but the exquisitely handsome movie star who plays him, Alain Delon; or that his uncouth brothers Simone, Vincenzo, and Ciro (Renato Salvatore, Spiros Focás, and Max Cartier) do not share with this champion the title of Best-Looking Male Ensemble in the All-European Cinema. What's more, the Parondi beauty is so widely mirrored throughout the film's large population of boxers, soldiers, workers, and other assorted male extras, that, in a quite un-Marxist sense, all men truly do seem like brothers: the millennial class divisions of plain and handsome have been overcome at last, and muscles and well-built frames, so unjustly distributed everywhere else, are here the common property of all.

Curiously, this extraordinary male beauty never sees much narrative service, even in the romance plots. In Visconti's earlier *Ossessione* (1943), the mere sight of Massimo Girotti with an open collar impelled Clara Calamai to a fatefully infatuated double take. Here Nadia (Annie Girardot) first regards Rocco's fine features and form with perfect nonchalance; what she falls for—and then only a couple of years later—is the mystique of his innocence. And while the sight of Simone in the shower probably does excite his promoter Morini (Roger Hanin), who calls him a "young Apollo," the celluloid closet's usual operation makes this homosexual undercurrent so elliptical, obscure, contradictory, and deniable that, if there is a story here, it is not one the film is willing to come out with. With a homelier cast, *Rocco*'s story would not only require little alteration; it would also gain more plau-

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The line-up of beauty

Rocco and His Brothers. © 1960 Titanus. DVD: Eureka/Masters of Cinema (U.K.).

sibility. From a narrative standpoint, the Parondi brothers are beautiful for nothing, like garments too fine to wear.

Yet there is no inhibition of the film's tendency to show one or another of them, especially Rocco, posed in an appreciative close-up or long shot. Though their beauty does not motivate the story, the story is frequently managed so as to motivate that beauty's extraneous display. Vincenzo is dull-witted, Simone sluggish, Rocco dreamy, and Ciro serious: all torpefying traits that rationalize the loitering camera's predilection for an equally lingering image. The labor of these proletarians—obviously no beautifier—takes place off-screen. What they are most frequently shown doing is dressing or undressing; and as they put on their shoulder-hugging sweaters and tight jeans, or strip down to underwear and boxing trunks, they are attractively drowsy, numb, bewildered—so consistently absent-minded, in a word, that they seem like creatures under enchantment. Even pugilism, whose incessant agitation might be thought to shatter this enchantment together with the *bel profilo* it shows to such advantage, comes under its spell: the boxers are sleepyheads. With "lead legs" and "slower than an ox," Simone must be frequently admonished to "wake up" in the ring; and Rocco, too, fights in a reverie, as if (to use his own metaphor) he were shadow-boxing in the mirror. Further, when he is shown doing just that, the resulting image is so powerfully iconic that MOC, oblivious to the Southern Question, has put it on the booklet cover.

This general narcolepsy—so different from the usual "determined" male hyperactivity in cinema—invests the

Transfixed

Ossessione. © 1943 Industrie Cinematografiche Italiane. DVD: Image Entertainment.

brothers with the mystery, the erotic fascination, attending anyone we see in his sleep; it makes them at once completely remote from real contact and fully available to fantasy appropriation. It is crucial to *Rocco*'s somnolent beauty that the brothers also be unawakened in the sexual sense, or at least seem so on the visual plane. In the absence of any chemistry between two such living dolls as Focás and Claudia Cardinale, for instance, it is anyone's guess how Vincenzo gets Ginetta pregnant; and Franca (Alessandra Panaro), doling out kisses like after-school cookies, is more mother to Ciro than girlfriend. As for Rocco—who is literally called the Sleeping Beauty by the girls at the laundry where he is briefly employed—he remains celibate throughout the film. Even with Nadia, everything stays on the surface, charmingly unconsummated. One of Simone's stated reasons for raping Nadia is to give Rocco, forced to witness the outrage, a lesson in sex education: he will show Rocco what Nadia "is," "how she makes love"; and as he flings her panties at (or rather onto) Rocco's face, he shouts, "Kiss them if you have the courage; you can only make love with these."

The beauty of Rocco and his brothers, then, lies in their splendidly inert chrysalis, which, in signaling the "immaturity" of their sexuality, preserves it in an appealingly polyvalent state of indefinition. Though often classically feminine in its poses and accessories (Vincenzo wears a flower, Rocco his mother's sweaters), this larval beauty embodies not the culturally repellent catastrophe of men who have become women, but the culturally endearing idyll of men who are still boys. In the sleepy limbo of latency, all things seem possible, because none has submitted to the mangling limitations of social realization and rule. For whether tragic or merely tiresome, the mature forms of male sexuality in *Rocco* are not pretty: molestation at one end, dutiful conjugal procreation at the other, and furtive homosexuality hovering over the entire range. Beauty, on the contrary, consists in the film's provocatively odd suggestion, at once utopian and defeated, that these things are best held in abeyance, in a sort of natural unconscious chastity. Accordingly, it makes perfect sense that Simone, the only brother whose adult sexual state gets visualized (in the seriously ugly forms of whoring, rape, and hustling), should lose his looks in the process. His face becomes drawn, his figure puffy, and—worst of all given the film's aesthetic of repose—he gets the shakes.

II

Rocco's too-beautiful beauty cannot be ascribed solely to the photogeny, however considerable, of its dormant male protagonists. It is also owing to Giuseppe Rotunno's comparably breathtaking cinematography. *Rocco*'s great *tableaux vivants*, as classically structured in their way as Delon's face and Salvatore's torso are in theirs, give only the half of it. We might find similarly pictorial compositions in a neo-realist work such as *Umberto D* (1952)—and with reason: its cinematographer Aldo Graziati not only worked for Visconti in *La Terra Trema* (1948) and *Senso* (1954), but also had Rotunno as his assistant for many years. Yet the artfulness of *Rocco*'s images is not discreetly obscured, as in De Sica, under naturalizing natural light; it is flaunted with all the synthetic luster, the artificial halo, common to the urban night and to classic black-and-white studio lighting.

I am especially struck by a certain glassiness that—unevenly, but insistently—overruns sections of the image, almost as if they had begun to freeze over, or were being laminated. This pervasive icing—here a spark or glimmer, there a more consistent sheen or glare—only partly results

A world of glass

Rocco and His Brothers. © 1960 Titanus. DVD: Eureka/Masters of Cinema (U.K.).

from vitreous surfaces (wet cement among them) reflecting the spots and arcs behind the camera or the numerous neon signs, light poles, headlights, lanterns, lamps, and candles in front of it. Not only do we see a lot of glass, we also often see through it, in the form of tram windows, car windshields, gym mirrors, display cases, and frosted doors. Rather than tactfully conceal its presence in the neo-realist manner, the camera compulsively projects its lens into a world that often looks as if it has been put under a bell jar. On a dresser in the Parondi household, a bell jar in fact stands prominently displayed; covering a figurine of Rocco's patron saint and surrounded with votives, it gleams suggestively.

But there are other and better emblems of the film's *beau idéal*—namely, the glossy or glassed-over photographs that we see all over the place from Cerri's office to Morini's apartment to the Parondi household, where, for lack of separate rooms, each brother's turf is marked by his tract of pictures on the wall, and a large family portrait dominates the whole. Such ubiquity bespeaks less the characters' aggregate fanaticism than the overriding obsession of the film itself, which holds up these photographs as literally shining examples of the visual perfection that it seems keen or anxious—in any case, compelled—to attain. With its own manifest fondness for fixed frames and successive close-ups, for photographic lighting and glazed surfaces, *Rocco* is a film that seems as invested in looking like a studio photograph as it is in making the Parondi brothers pose for one.

Although indissolubly bonded, however, the two kinds of stillness—that of male latency and that of the photograph—by no means share the same implications. Latency, in making the subject's development an open question, is all sweet promise and suspense. By contrast, the photograph, with its proof that the subject "has been" (Barthes), records both an eternal fixity and an absolute past; there will be no awakening or breaking out, and even the moment of its possibility has fled. The innumerable photographs *of* latency in the film thus at once preserve their subject and write its epitaph, transforming the fresh and untouched into the fetishized and untouchable. In them, the forward-looking time of the content so intimately collapses into the backward-looking time of the medium that latency appears as a sort of souvenir of itself. That is why these photographs are always objects of pathos, nostalgia, denial, melancholy; their scintillant skin glorifies the dead-and-gone no less than the bell jar that covers San Rocco's statuette in the Parondi apartment or, for that matter, the glass tomb encasing his corpse in Venice.

III

And the film's own frames or photograms? Compared to photography, of course, film is much better suited for rendering vital signs; here, the image seems to move, and the human figures in it to live and breathe. Yet film also enjoys a variety of means to arrest the image flow, slow it down, or otherwise reveal it as a mere succession of photographs. Like any other motion picture, Rocco necessarily brings its still images to life, but if it thereby gives its slumbering male beauties the added charm of cinematic respiration, it also contrives to stifle the fairest of all in photography's eternal rest. Watch with me a shot that, never figuring in "political" readings of the film, and scarcely mentioned even in plot summaries, may be the film's most beautiful and is certainly its most shocking. I mean the prolonged, increasingly tight close-up of a recumbent Rocco that occurs in the middle of the film (at the end of the "Stolen Broach" chapter). Rocco and Simone have been lying on adjacent beds; Rocco has a message for Simone from Nadia: she is going away, destination withheld. When Simone hears this, the rage simmering in his voice belies the indifference professed by his words: "You know her, too? But what does she want with me? She's just another whore, who thinks she's a great lady. Let her go to hell! If I see her on the street again, I'll turn my head the other way. Tell her that, if you see her again, tell her I said that!" And then, as if he were rehearsing the street encounter with Rocco in Nadia's place, he turns away from him and goes to sleep. Throughout this conversation, the camera, instead of cutting, has simply traveled back and forth from one brother to the other, creating an odd continuity between them. But now it stays with Rocco, framing him in profile on his bed. He slowly turns his head toward us, and crooks an arm behind it, as if pensive. The camera gets closer and closer until Rocco's face fills—and threatens to overfill—the screen, which then fades to a new scene with the title "Rocco" written over it.

In narrative terms, the close-up seems almost ostentatiously futile. "As if pensive," I have written to make the best of it. But what has Rocco to think about, really? What motivates his brother's outburst is obvious straightaway: Simone is hurt and angry, insanely in love with Nadia, and already prepared to view Rocco as a rival. And if Rocco reflected on these things in *any* degree, let alone for as long as the shot goes on, he could never have been so naive as to get involved with Nadia (in the very next scene!), or to be surprised by Simone's fury when the involvement is discovered. How can Rocco forget what this prolonged episode of thoughtfulness should have engraved on his mind so *memorably*?

But of course something else is going on, as becomes grippingly plain as soon as Rocco turns his face to the camera. He is not thinking at all. He is *letting himself be looked at*, offering his exquisite face and flesh to the camera with the thrillingly unqualified submissiveness of an odalisque. The resulting image offers a limit case of latency, an expectancy so heavily underscored, so ripe, that it seems on the verge of exploding into event. The languorous pose may remind us of Girodet's *Endymion*, but not the assertion of axillary hair, which is so startling to see on Delon's glabrous white body that we almost feel we have witnessed a sudden sprout of pubic hair. More: while Delon may be simply looking at the camera, we know that what is filling Rocco's vacant eyes off-screen is the sleeping figure of Simone. Rocco in a daze, Simone in a doze: the two latencies, proximate and opposed, intensify our sense of this moment as a fatal coupling, a "Hitchcockian" encounter at once homoerotic and transferential.

As if the calamity of this coupling were prophetically impacted into Rocco's eyes, the shot, continuing on, transforms the homoerotic image into a deathly one. The camera keeps closing in on Delon's face, as if, in response to its overwhelming appeal, it were going to kiss it, but—as happens with a kiss—the visual pleasure gets spoiled the nearer we get. The sexy armpit vanishes. The proportions of the face grow too large to sit comfortably, not to say classically, in the frame. We start to observe such pores, wrinkles, and other minor imperfections on the skin as to suggest the skull beneath. And the eyes are as fixed and motionless as in a freeze-frame; if they did not give a final blink to shake us out of this morbid perception, we would think they were glass eyes or a zombie's. The shot that first blooms as a living pin-up droops into almost a morgue slide. Rocco seems to be dying into a photograph of himself. (Would this be Delon's on-screen destiny too? A close variant on this mortuary image appears in "William Wilson," Louis Malle's segment of *Spirits of the Dead* [1968], where Delon-Rocco's deathliness becomes Delon-Wilson's actual represented death.)

IV

Later in the film, Rocco's superstitious mother Rosaria (Katina Paxinou) suspects that someone has put the evil eye on him; in the absence of any literal evidence to support this idea, it is tempting to suppose that the *malocchio* was cast in the very close-up we have just described, so heavily did the camera's gaze appear to weigh on its object. Soon enough, in any case, the close-up's implicit trajectory finds extravagant enactment in Rocco's story. In the film's great climax, Rocco

Dying into the close-up

First five: *Rocco and His Brothers.* © 1960 Titanus. DVD: Eureka/Masters of Cinema (U.K.). Bottom right: *Spirits of the Dead* (1967). © Films Marceau/Produzioni Europee Associati. DVD: Homevision.

and Simone are once again lying on a bed. But now the bed is shared, and the others have been shut out of the room. "I killed Nadia," Simone confesses, and Rocco, though screaming "No! No!" in disbelief, throws himself on him, vehemently sobbing and heaving. "Isn't that what you wanted?" Simone continues, and Rocco, though now screaming, "I know I'm guilty," holds him even tighter. Just before this exchange, as the brothers enter the bedroom, and Rocco violently slams the door, a small tinkling sound is heard, the noise of breaking glass.

But no, it is likely only the door key fallen to the ground, and it will, one infers, be put back in place, since after this melodramatic outpouring, Rocco reverts to his former celibacy with a vengeance. And the vengeance seems more than anything directed against himself: once pure promise, his state is now pure privation. He will serve out his youth alone, without brother or friend; in exile, not only from Lucania but from Italy too; and earning his living from an activity —boxing—that he despises. This living death is perfectly captured in the still life that is our last on-screen view of him. Rocco ends up literally becoming a photograph—the cover image on a boxing magazine, of which numerous copies have been pinned up in a row at the newsvendor's. In these images, Delon could almost pass for a boxer at last; his face is now so gaunt that his delicate facial bones protrude as if out of joint; we might be looking at a series of x-rays. But more

Where beauty leads

Rocco and His Brothers. © 1960 Titanus. DVD: Eureka/Masters of Cinema (U.K.).

directly to the point of such neatly aligned images, we might also be looking at a piece of filmstrip, and a quite peculiar one at that. For the successive images are all identical; were such a strip to be projected, we would see only a freeze-frame, the ultimate negation of Bazinian "becoming" on film. We could hardly ask for a more explicit emblazoning of the cinematic aesthetic that consigns the erotic appeal of male beauty to the nostalgic, bereft form of the photograph.

On another wavelength, of course, the film's would-be Gramscian message has just been sounding as loudly as the factory whistle that punctuates it on the soundtrack. Ciro, embraced by his Milanese fiancée in the company of fellow workers, has achieved a manifestly PC—and all but PCI—social integration; he sketches out a still brighter prospect for Luca (Rocco Vidolazzi), the youngest Parondi, in which the boy will return to a changed Lucania that has also been married to the modern forces of progress. But Luca is not seeing any of that; like us, he is hypnotized by the multitude of identical Roccos on display at the newsvendor's. And as he slowly—desultorily—passes these images, he does something at once simple-minded and psychotic: he starts to caress them, one after another, on the lips, the cheek, the forehead. Still beautiful Rocco! Might not he awaken even now, if, like a magic lamp, his photograph were rubbed the right way? Might not all of them awaken, and form a mighty host? Luca thus disqualifies himself from being neo-realism's prescribed signifier of the future, the future in which his longing for Rocco would be successfully dragooned, like the child army at the end of *Open City* (1945), into the cause of universal human fellowship. Instead, he seems to be beginning—or rather for an instant resisting beginning—a painful apprenticeship to the closet-as-photograph. The grown-up workers he passes, also admiring the procession of Roccos, are naturally further advanced in training; like mature film spectators, they are more or less resigned to the fact that they are "just looking." Their lethargic witnessing is the quelled form of a political struggle based on libido rather than labor. Quite unlike Ciro with his old-Left boosterism, *Rocco* is finally only committed to brooding over the beautiful but blocked state of desire—and of cinema—that one might call the people's homosexuality.

D. A. MILLER is John F. Hotchkis Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. His BFI Film Classics volume on Fellini's *8½* has just been published by Palgrave.

DVD DATA *Rocco e i suoi fratelli.* Director: Luchino Visconti. © 1960 Titanus. Publisher: Eureka/Masters of Cinema Collection, 2008. £22.99, 2 discs.

GRINDHOUSE: AN EXPERIMENT IN THE DEATH OF CINEMA

CAETLIN BENSON-ALLOTT ARGUES THAT TARANTINO AND RODRIGUEZ'S EXPLOITATION TRIBUTE ALSO ENVISIONS A NEW CINEPHILIA WITHOUT FILM

There is a beautiful moment in the second half of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino's double feature, *Grindhouse*, during which Kim (Tracy Thoms) assures her car-chase adversary, Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell), "Oh, you know I can't just let you go," and *Grindhouse* starts to become the best exploitation movie made in the U.S. since the death of, well, exploitation movies (or rather their corporate takeover in the mid-1970s). As Kim accelerates towards her victim, the image temporarily clears of the scratches and stretchmarks that otherwise characterize this homage to B-grade auto movies. Kim's 1970 Dodge Challenger then nudges Mike's black Dodge Charger over a small cliff and onto a four-lane highway. There the muscle cars race through a field of compacts, SUVs, and mini-vans. Largely representative of not only a pre-oil crisis American affection for automobiles but also a movie culture based on that affection, they knock aside the domesticated products of the contemporary auto industry and annihilate the movies industry's cheap imitations of their exploitation history, literally plowing down a drive-in marquee for *Scary Movie 4* (2006) and *Wolf Creek* (2005). The brilliance of this scene lies not in its nostalgic social commentary, however, nor even its masterful choreography. Rather the scene stands out for its ironic impossibility; there never was a film like *Death Proof* (in which a black woman "taps" a white man's "ass") and there never will be again, because *Grindhouse*, grindhouses, and indeed theatrical exhibition itself are now dead.

Reviewing *Grindhouse* thus requires one to review its distribution history, because the movie also thinks about the effects of digital imagery and video marketing on film history and theatrical exhibition. In April 2007, the Weinstein Company brought to U.S. multiplexes and arthouses Tarantino and Rodriguez's joint homage to 1970s urban exploitation theaters, or grindhouses. Their double feature offers a recreation of the genres that flourished in that exhibition space as well as their means of (special-effects) production, for together the directors' films question what sort of storytelling gets lost or enabled in the turn from stunts and celluloid to CGI and high-definition video. Yet that comparison is only staged for the (industrially superannuated) theater audience, since the film *Grindhouse* became two DVDs, *Grindhouse: Planet Terror* and *Grindhouse: Death Proof*. This division of the double feature marks the cinema as a nostalgic architecture, since it implies that the very questions *Grindhouse* asks are inappropriate for, irrelevant to, or perhaps just beyond a video audience. For that reason, any review of *Grindhouse* must review all three films. It must explore how the double feature looks back at irretrievable exhibition traditions and how the movies within it thematize, reflect on, and indeed profit from post-theatrical film culture.

Both the film *Grindhouse* and the video *Planet Terror* open with a trailer for a non-existent movie, *Machete*, about a former Mexican federalé (Danny Trejo) hired to assassinate a U.S. senator. Rife with references to Rodriguez's other films as well as 1970s film conventions, *Machete* creates the past-and-present in which the rest of *Grindhouse* takes place. This blurry fictional temporality is figurally represented by the on-screen dust and scratches that appear in both *Machete* and *Planet Terror*. For both were shot with a Panavision HD video camera, meaning that their imperfections are digital composites, image imperfections lifted from celluloid transfers and added to the necessarily pristine HD file. These effects position both *Machete* and *Planet Terror* in a new mode of digital nostalgia, the transhistorical, simulacral moment in which *Machete* can both feature cars and feathered haircuts from the 1970s and take place against backgrounds (specifically cars and houses) that are manifestly twenty-first century. Indeed, the final shot of the trailer, a digitally scarred 1970s mock-up of the Weinstein Company logo, further legitimizes *Grindhouse*'s melancholic project by incorporating into exploitation history a film studio that was not founded until

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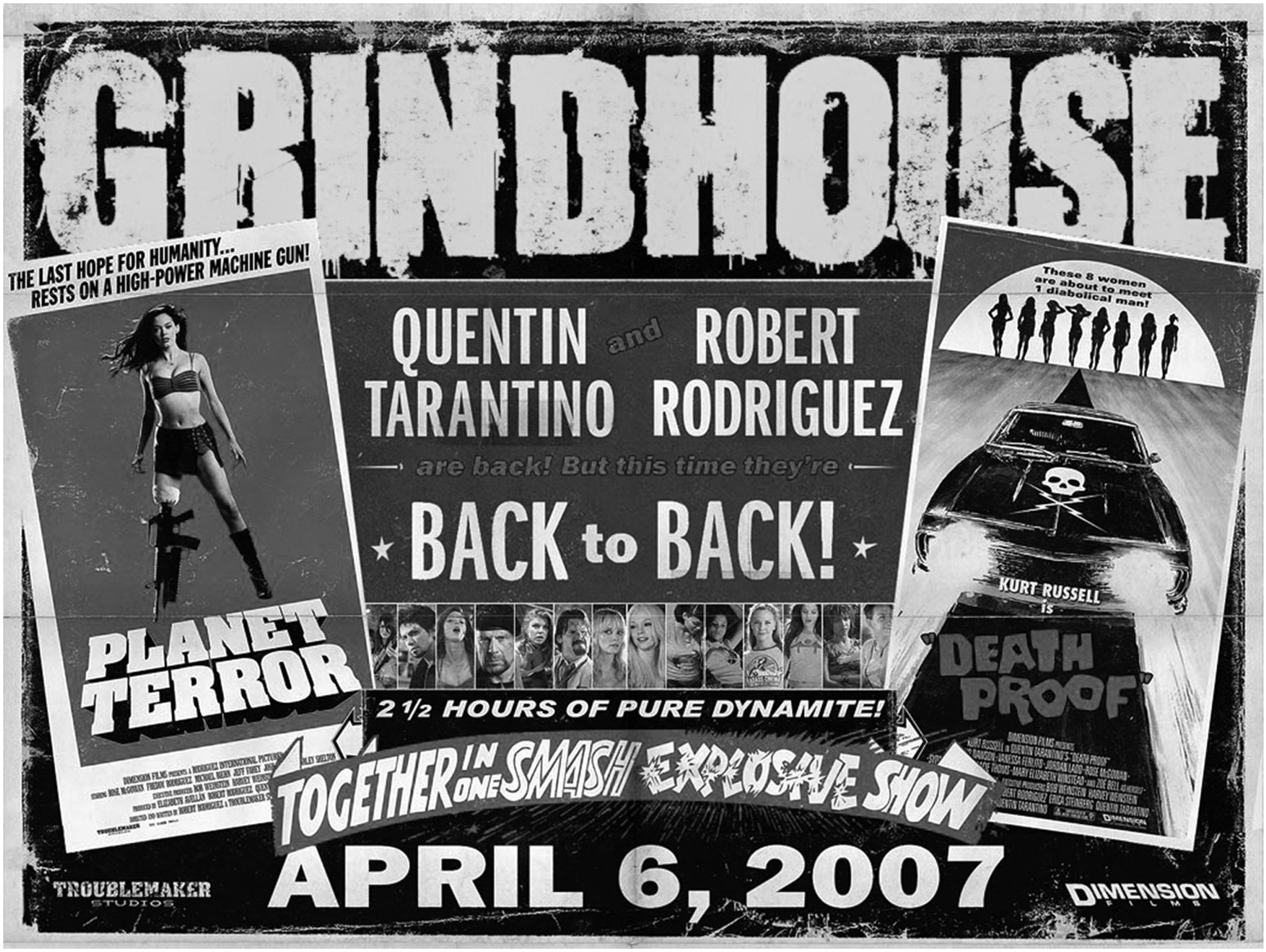

© 2007 The Weinstein Company

2005. Of course, this ironic attempt to contextualize both the Weinstein Company and its feature as artifacts is also humorous, both because the viewer knows the logo is a mock-up and because it need not have been. After all, *Grindhouse* is a product of Dimension Films, one of the most enduring exploitation companies to arise out of genre's 1970s heyday, although Dimension Films has since been bought up by Miramax, Disney, and "your friends at the Weinstein Company." By dating the Weinstein Company logo then, instead of using an original Dimension logo, *Grindhouse* indicates that it will do more than merely celebrate lost cinema history. Rather it will create a transhistorical cinematic mythology, such that the digital scars on the Weinstein logo both substitute for projections that never happened and suggest that those projections may never happen again.

Before analyzing how *Grindhouse* marks the end of theatrical exhibition, however, one ought to pause to consider another, complementary use of the digital scar in *Planet Terror*, namely its contribution to what might be called celluloid affect. During the opening credits of the movie, a go-go dancer (Cherry Darling, played by Rose McGowan) undulates to the movie's theme song, but her sexiest gestures destroy the very film they are recorded on. When Darling licks her reflection in the stage mirror, the image first shudders (as if its sprocket holes where breaking under the sexual tension) and then dissolves into flame, its material evidently too combustible for the projector to screen. This sequence acknowledges the significance of apparatus in the creation of affect, and Rodriguez repeats the move elsewhere in his film to add meaning to his ostentatious use of CGI. That is, Troublemaker Digital (Rodriguez's in-house CGI team) adds scratches, dust noise, and even celluloid discoloration throughout *Planet Terror* to supplement more typical amplifications of shock and suspense (such as scoring and editing). These marks suggest that the "film" cannot but get carried away by the narrative it contains, but *Planet Terror* also uses an array of conventional CGI effects to demonstrate that there is more than film involved in making of this film. *Planet Terror* makes no issue of

PHANTOM CELLULOID ARTIFACTS, PROSTHETIC EFFECTS, AND THE MORTIFICATION POTENTIAL OF COMPUTER-GENERATED IMAGERY

Planet Terror. © 2007 The Weinstein Company. DVD: The Weinstein Company.

its reliance on greenscreens and digital composition, as when Rodriguez amputates McGowan's right leg one third of the way through the movies and replaces it with first a table leg and later a machine gun. This digital illusion might invite the exploitation cineaste to recall the prominent role of amputees in the early days of prosthetic effects, but it also highlights what those effects artists could not do, such as cut off an actress's leg and replace it with a gun. In short, *Planet Terror*'s insistence on its cinematic history is also the *raison d'être* of its special effects, turning the latter into a digital homage to both a bygone platform (celluloid) and a bygone genre (the exploitation film).

In fact, these digital excesses celebrate a specific subgenre of exploitation film, namely splatter cinema, a derivative of Italian art horror. Like early splatter, Rodriguez's film wants to look at what the flesh can do (as opposed to *Death Proof*'s interest in what it can withstand), the various fluids it can ooze, ways it can break, and decays it can manage. *Planet Terror* is therefore even less interested in psychological motivation than *Death Proof* will be. *Planet Terror* is not actually particularly interested in frightening its viewer (as *Death Proof* will); rather it pursues the uncomfortable sensation an audience might experience when shown potentials in the human body that they have never seen before. What matters is showmanship and the way humor can emphasize the mortification of the flesh. Thus one of the pivotal gags in the movie occurs when a local deputy asks the sheriff to book a perpetrator who, in his words, "bit my goddamn finger off." The sheriff tells his deputy to quit whining and grab a Band-Aid, which inspires the deputy to turn around, raise his hand towards the camera, and almost cheerfully report, "I'm not exaggerating, using colorful speech, Sheriff. He bit my finger clean off!" This narratively gratuitous bit of gore and the humor with which it is presented pay homage to the generic competition among slasher films to outdo one another with increasingly grisly and inane tortures for the human body. Rodriguez does not merely cite convention with this contribution, however; rather he returns the competition to its roots, since the missing finger in question belongs to Tom Savini, who was the special-effects mastermind behind the gore in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980). Savini's missing finger thus suggests the digital castration of latex effects by CGI, the end of a certain material era in film history, and a passing of the torch from one era of exploitation filmmakers to another.

This effect is preserved on the DVD edition of *Grindhouse: Planet Terror*, which contains enough ironic distance on the cinema to offer its viewer an "audience reaction track" she can superimpose over the movie. This nod to theatrical ambience seems too cheeky to qualify as properly nostalgic, and in fact it might be said to mark the loss (on video) of the more critical contemplation of cinematic materiality and history that occurs as a result of *Planet Terror*'s interaction with the aggressive realism of *Death Proof*. For whereas *Planet Terror* builds its elegiac celebration of 1970s splatter movies on digital enhancements of the former's prosthetic excesses, *Death Proof* marks the passing of the car-chase movie by refusing any digital assistance. Indeed, Tarantino insists in interviews about *Death Proof* that "I hate that [CGI] stuff" and that the thrill of the car-chase movie comes from knowing that it cannot be faked. While *Planet Terror* documents what has happened to special effects since the grindhouse era, *Death Proof* showcases those elements of exploitation that mainstream U.S. filmmaking later incorporated, namely the adrenaline rush and suspense of the car-chase and girl-gang movies. *Death Proof* offers tension rather than mortification, and so leaves its narrative available for spectatorial catharsis and narrative closure, which may be why Tarantino's feature garnered far more critical praise than Rodriguez's (including a screening and Palme d'Or nomination at Cannes). *Death Proof* follows the multiple attempts of the deranged Stuntman Mike to stage gruesome collisions with carfuls of beautiful women using industrially enhanced, "death-proof" stunt cars. Yet when he chooses to pick on his own kind—two stuntwomen (played by Thoms and professional stuntwoman Zoë Bell) and a movie make-up artist (Rosario Dawson)—they punish his aggression by switching genres, turning an homage to *Convoy* (1978) and *Vanishing Point* (1971) into a riff on *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) as the women first shoot then punch and finally dropkick their tormentor. Unlike *Planet Terror*, *Death Proof* does not offer gore as celebration of artistic production, for whereas *Planet Terror* is interested in what the human body will suffer, *Death Proof* wants to discover what it can do. It can bleed and die, yes, but it can also ride on the hood of a car moving at untold speeds for upwards of six-and-a-half minutes. Such is the point, ultimately, of a movie about stuntpeople and cars—to see what they are made of.

But, of course, such comparisons are no longer possible, since *Grindhouse* no longer exists. Although *Death Proof* in its full and independent form may be Tarantino's most charismatic cultural recycling program to date, the *Death Proof* one saw in *Grindhouse* has been superseded by its extended DVD version. Indeed, neither DVD allows its user–viewer to re-remove the "missing reels" that characterize *Grindhouse* and comment on their genres' anti-psychological approaches to narrative suspense. Furthermore, neither DVD contains *Grindhouse*'s interfeature advertisement for Acuña Boys, a

Revenge of the girl gang

Death Proof. © 2007 The Weinstein Company. DVD: The Weinstein Company.

Mexican restaurant in Austin, Texas that also appears on a fountain cup in the beginning of *Death Proof*, nor Eli Roth, Rob Zombie, and Edgar Wright's fake trailers. In short, one cannot recreate *Grindhouse* at home from the DVDs of *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*, just as one cannot recreate the grindhouse theater tradition the film celebrates. These losses of the original mark *Grindhouse* as both an homage to exploitation films and a metonymy for the obsolescence of theatrical exhibition. Almost no one went to see *Grindhouse* in its theatrical release, but even before the reviewers and pundits began hypothesizing its failure to find its audience (possibly because cineastes who remember grindhouses are not exploitation fans and nouveau-exploitation fans do not remember grindhouses), the Weinstein Company may have already considered dividing their double features into two videos, thus maximizing their profits (DVD sales now typically double the box-office take of any given movie). The Weinsteins could even have predetermined their video distribution plan as an insurance policy against the film's theatrical failure. If so, *Grindhouse*'s economic life cycle is far from unique, since most Hollywood products no longer make back their negative costs before their DVD premier, an industrial reality that recasts theatrical distribution as a necessary advertising expense for maximum DVD sales. This twenty-first-century exhibition history would then be the real story captured in *Grindhouse*, a movie less about lost genres than about what is lost now that viewers wait for it on video.

CAETLIN BENSON-ALLOTT is an assistant professor of Film and Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz

ABSTRACT The cinematic double feature *Grindhouse* (2007) both celebrates cinematic history and typifies post-theatrical distribution practices. The film thematizes this paradox in the aesthetic tension between its two features, *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*, but each movie also offers a unique reinterpretation of its exploitation genre.

KEYWORDS *Grindhouse*, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, *Death Proof, Planet Terror*

CREDITS *Death Proof*. Director, producer, writer, cinematographer: Quentin Tarantino. Producers: Robert Rodriguez, Erica Steinberg. Editor: Sally Menke. © 2007 The Weinstein Company. U.S. distribution: The Weinstein Company.

Planet Terror. Director, producer, writer, cinematographer, editor, music: Robert Rodriguez. Producer: Quentin Tarantino. Editor: Ethan Maniquis. © 2007 The Weinstein Company. U.S. distribution: The Weinstein Company.

PARANOID PARK: THE HOME FRONT

MEGAN RATNER REFLECTS ON THE TORPID ENVIRONMENT DEPICTED IN GUS VAN SANT'S LATEST DRAMA OF ADOLESCENT LIFE

Paranoid Park extends Gus Van Sant's ruminations on how American life affects the young. In tandem with his last two films, *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), *Paranoid Park* deals with life on the home front in a time of war. Whereas recent ordinary-youth-in-trouble films such as *Juno* and *Knocked Up* (both 2007) find soothing, audience-flattering answers that have a great deal in common with *Big* (1988)—adulthood gets tried on for inconsequent size, the effects all win-win—Van Sant focuses instead on violent undercurrents in everyday life; on what success means; on what defines a man, or at least a grown-up. A craving for deviant experiences is highlighted. It drives the two teens in *Elephant* to carry out a high-school shooting; in *Last Days*, it sends Blake (Michael Pitt) on a drug-induced trip to nowhere around his property (he makes vain attempts all through the film to connect with nature, to find some solace, but only the shotgun seems to give any comfort). Both the earlier films show young men living synthetic, disconnected lives of which the strangest aspect may well be the so-called normality that surrounds them. In *Paranoid Park*, this anodyne but suffocating environment serves as camouflage, even for manslaughter.

Quite faithfully though not chronologically adapted from Blake Nelson's 2006 novel of the same name, *Paranoid Park* revolves around the Never-Never Land skateboard community. Alex (Gabe Nevins), a Portland, Oregon skateboarder, inadvertently kills a railway security guard. The proximity of the killing to Paranoid Park, a rough pocket park beneath the Burnside Bridge, casts all the skaters at Alex's school as potential suspects. Alex admits to nothing. Struggling under the weight of knowledge for which teendom has no categories, Alex tries to square the ethics of his situation with what he assumes will be his fate if he confesses. His one real friend and the only person who picks up on a change in him is Macy (Lauren McKinney). Unwilling to make any demands on him, she urges him to get his problems on paper. The film opens as he begins to write.

Gus Van Sant, Gabe Nevins, Lauren McKinney

Paranoid Park Courtesy MK2. Photo: Scott Green.

Van Sant jumbles the narrative to reflect the restive bursts in which Alex remembers and writes: "Paranoid Park was great. I could have sat there all night long watching the skaters and the girls and all the stuff goin' on. The only bad thing was I started thinking about other things. Like my parents." Alex narrates much of the film in speech so affectless that, even at times of emotion, his voice has the intonation and rhythm of small talk. Jump-cuts reinforce a generally hallucinatory atmosphere to the memories; they feel less like traditional movie hindsight and more like drug-induced flashbacks. Though Alex is probably drug-experienced, drugs are not part of the story. Yet as Alex glides through the chute-like hallways of his high school, the very walls seemingly about to fold in on him, or watches the gravity-resistant skaters rise and dip at Paranoid Park, the film reflects his own sense of watching what happened to him happen as if to someone else. In a world where almost everything has been photographed or videoed, it's difficult not to imagine life as one long movie. Van Sant adeptly conveys the provisional aspect of much of contemporary teenage life. The repetition

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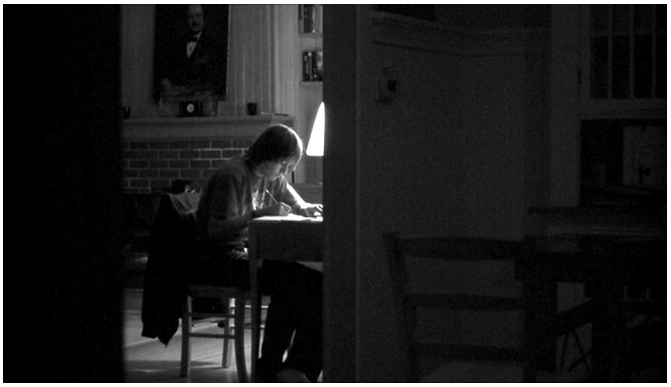


Remote adolescence

Paranoid Park. © 2007 MK2 Productions. DVD: Tartan Video (U.K.).

of certain scenes suggests that life for these young people is often little more than a series of good and less-good takes.

The skating sequences at Paranoid and beyond are often balletically slowed-down, soundtracked by French vocals, industrial sounds and birdcalls, among other acoustics. Juxtaposition of the skaters and the experimental music seems a little arty at first but references the interconnected, spongy world of the Web, where chronology and context matter less than coolness. In what is primarily a 35mm film, Van Sant and cinematographers Christopher Doyle and Rain Kathy Li mix in Super 8. The cuts from one stock to the other also call to mind the Internet hodge-podge and heighten the oneiric qualities without caving in to whimsy.

Skateboarding grew out of 1950s surfing. In many ways, mainstream culture portrays surfers and skaters as equally, even a bit dangerously, insubordinate. Skaters began on California sidewalks, but now subvert built environments anywhere, often appropriating marginalized, unused spaces. It is as much about doing as about watching; even a cell phone can capture the latest feat, the documentation part of the culture. Its denizens have a highly developed skill that means nothing in the adult world, their quest for perpetual motion a corollary to the Lost Boys feeling of Paranoid Park. These cast-offs, whose harrowing kin make Alex's divorcing-but-still-functioning parents seem almost consoling, are part of the generation of ahistorical youth, neither burdened by the past nor galvanized by the future

An inexperienced skater, Alex tells his friend Jared (Jake Miller) he's not ready for the park. "Nobody's ever ready for Paranoid Park," he announces, the scene repeated twice in the film. In keeping with his general passivity, Alex perches on the sidelines, yet he's drawn to it even when Jared cancels plans for a second visit. Driving in his mother's car, he cycles through various music states, from hip-hop to classical, pausing for a fast-food fuel-up before he parks the car safely away from the action. It's only one of two scenes in the film when Alex smiles, his face suddenly all boy, with no trace of the man-to-be.

He agrees to accompany an older fellow on a beer run, his interest less for the drink than in hopping a freight to get to the store. In Doyle's lush shots, the rail yard looks submerged, as if seen through inky water. Guided by his new buddy and clutching his skateboard, Alex has a few minutes of freight-train thrills before a security guard hustles up alongside and begins striking out with his nightstick. Fighting back, Alex whacks him off balance, right onto the tracks of an oncoming train. As his buddy disappears in the night, Alex looks shell-shocked. The camera lingers for a moment on what he sees: the grotesquely severed body of the security guard, its legless torso, arms and head crawling towards Alex. Though death is immediate in the novel, in the film, Alex has time simultaneously to recognize his own vulnerability and unexpected power.

War is mentioned only in passing dialogue, yet Van Sant's adaptation conveys the novel's more explicit references, from the first page when Alex notes that nearby surf sounds like "little bombs going off," to just after the killing: "I thought about soldiers in Iraq, in Vietnam, in every other war. They *had* [*sic*] to kill people. And they had to live with it." In a subtle parallel with widespread domestic unease about the remote exercise of American military power, Alex embodies the contradictions of self-preservation at the cost of moral ambivalence at best. The gore, unusual for Van Sant, tallies with the mangled bodies served up by round-the-clock news. Though not overtly about the war, *Paranoid Park* suggests how the conflict plays out in the national imagination.

On college campuses, in high schools, in drive-bys, and in malls, killing is everywhere. Television combat scenes, real or acted, are so familiar they have little more effect than a test pattern. Picking off characters drives the most popular videogames and movies outdo each other in graphic bloodshed. At the same time, America is engaged in a nearly abstract war,

OTHER LEVELS OF THINGS

Paranoid Park. © 2007 MK2 Productions. DVD: Tartan Video (U.K.).

fought not only by someone else, but quite likely a mercenary independent contractor. In one generation, war has become the problem of the unlucky few rather than a hazard for the majority. It is against this backdrop of the home front, with its singular combination of mayhem and preternatural placidity, that Van Sant has set his last three films. Underlying each of them is the notion that the America people live in is far more a figment of their imagination than they realize, brought on by a terrible confusion of communal insularity with maverick individuality.

By the time of the death scene, Alex has already recalled his meeting with Detective Richard Lu (Dan Liu). Lu is a solid, if unaware, presence. He and Alex talk across an oversized classroom table, near a banner rooting students on to "ASPIRE." Using noir conventions to spotlight the detective's eyes, Van Sant conveys not only Alex's narrowed focus but also how he might very well see this authority figure in movie-lit terms. What's striking in these scenes is Alex's ability, despite an affable, possibly even naive view of the world, to dissemble. Except for a momentary "oh shit" when he discovers from local news that the guard died, he disconnects. Even at the rail yard, he stays clearheaded, his considerations shaped by what he understands of society's system, right down to wondering about a lawyer ("what sports figures do").

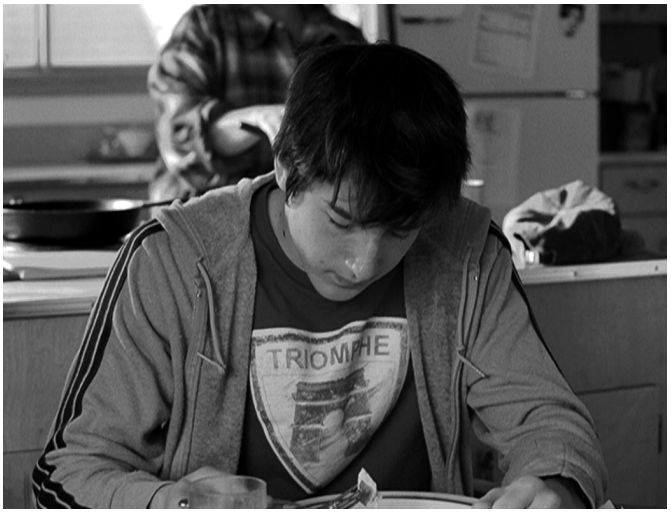
Alex remains absently present, passivity his greatest defense. He is most compliant with his me-tooer girlfriend Jennifer (Taylor Momsen), whose over-made-up eyes and zeal for peer approval suggest the frenzy of the consumer-besotted young women in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Impatient to get her virginity out of the way, she coaxes the hyperdocile Alex relentlessly. (This is in startling contrast to the female-initiated sex montage in *Juno*, with its winsome shot of panties around Juno's ankles and the teddy-bear coziness of her lips whispering into her boyfriend's ear.) The conquest made, Jennifer takes time only to discuss condoms and how soon they can do it again, before leaving to call her girlfriends. The scene plays from Alex's murky perspective, Jennifer's every gesture mimicked from television and movies, his part merely deflowering stand-in. The sex happens to Alex in a life he's already left behind

When he subsequently breaks up with Jennifer, their predictable lines are submerged under Nino Rota's main theme from *Amarcord* (1973). Importing music written for one movie into another has become something of a trend lately, as in *I'm Not There* and *The Darjeeling Limited* (both 2007), but few use it to such good effect as Van Sant does here, the reality of life and death in the train yard constantly bumping up against the death-in-life of high school and suburbia. He also uses excerpts from *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), indicative of Alex's muddle of fantasy and reality. The overlapping of one with the other runs through Federico Fellini's work, generally coupled, as it is here, with male passivity and helplessness. Although Alex burns his confession, the knowledge he has cannot be unlearned. "I just feel like there are other things that happen," he tells Macy, "Outside normal life. Outside parents and girlfriends and breakups. Like right out there. There are other levels of things."

In his recent work, Van Sant has noticeably refused an easy-access visual approach to character psychology: the frustrating distance at which Blake is kept for most of *Last Days*, demanding that viewers wonder about his state of mind rather than consume it from a close-up, is a case in point. In *Paranoid Park*, Doyle and sound designer Leslie Schatz maintain a tension between what Alex does (very little, actually, though he's often on the move) and his mental state as reflected in the soundscape and the camera's subtle off-angles such as the post-killing car scene with Jared, whose head, as he questions Alex about his new skateboard, appears huge. But the best example is the shower scene, which Van Sant doubles back on later in the film and is acoustically cribbed from the shower scene in *Elephant* (both are soundtracked by "Walk Through Resonant Landscape" by Francis White). Here, the camera follows Alex into the shower, a slowed-down image of drops running off his boyishly shaggy hair. Alex seems to actually be submerged, as if he were drowning by drips.

Van Sant uses his setting to play up Alex's alienation. As in his two last films, Van Sant's Portland occupies the place found on real-world maps yet is distinctively not that place. Unlike David Lynch's down-the-rabbit-hole oddities, Van Sant shows what is commonly acknowledged as normal American life for the collection of absurdities it so often is. Collecting himself at Jared's vacated house (the single mother gone for the weekend, Jared scoring with willing co-eds at Oregon State), Alex showers off the evidence of the killing, helping himself to Jared's T-shirt and jeans. Standing on the plush wall-to-wall, amid Jared's mother's fanatically matched furniture, he puts through a call to his uncle, only to be told by the automated operator to "have a nice Citizenship Day." The funereal sterility and enforced cheerfulness of this ordinary scene are chilling and spooky.

Van Sant's Portland has strong affinities with Jeff Wall's Vancouver. Like Van Sant, Wall presents a Vancouver that shares physical attributes with the city yet is not documentary. Though Wall's stills express the idea more formally, Van Sant is also drawn to the tableau as a way of opening out a moment into a scene, rather than hewing to a standard plot. Alex's recollections are achronological, based not in time but association. The freeze-frame violence of Wall's *Milk* (1984)



Downcast eyes

Top left: *Elephant*. © 2003 Home Box Office. DVD: Optimum Home Entertainment (U.K.). Top right: *Last Days*. © 2004 Home Box Office. DVD: Optimum Home Entertainment (U.K.). Bottom: *Paranoid Park*. © 2007 MK2 Productions. DVD: Tartan Video (U.K.).

comes to mind, especially with its milk-spilling manchild, his back literally against the wall. Wall also has a similar awareness of the built environment as both formative and deformative; his *Eviction* (1988/2004), in which the home-loss drama occurs against the backdrop of freeway overpass and the massive expanse of the Pacific Northwest sky, looks like a possible Van Sant outtake. The same could be said of several of Wall's less-known black-and-whites, such as *Passerby* (1996), an ambiguous nighttime shot of a young man looking back at a passing figure, and, in particular, of *Night* (2001), in which only prolonged viewing reveals details of a waterside encampment beneath an overpass. Like Wall, Van Sant shows a parallel, looking-glass world.

For Alex, Paranoid Park is the dark side, the place where he can break out of the staid, innocuous routines of home and school. The park is a cure for his experiential deprivation. Along with this eagerness for perverse novelty, *Elephant*, *Last Days*, and *Paranoid Park* share the exile of the housed but homeless. Home is the first real word of *Last Days*, Blake's aching howl into the night, which becomes his wrung-out version of "Home on the Range," his castle-home anything but comforting. The only home life in *Elephant* is Alex's (Alex Frost) cluttered basement bedroom and his mother's resentful pancake breakfast on the day of the shooting. In *Paranoid Park*, Alex spends time everywhere but home. In each instance, Van Sant poses questions about the place of home in America, the reality at a total remove from the snug promises on television and in advertisements. For all of these young men, the only comfort is being on the move, including, in many ways, leaving home.

In a sense, Van Sant himself had to leave home to get this movie made. The "Indie" designation long ago slid from definition to type; except that its subject is inarguably American, *Paranoid Park*'s look, sound, structure, and moral ambiguity are strikingly non-American. Like David Lynch, whose *Inland Empire* was partially financed by French Studio Canal, Van Sant relied on French MK2 Productions. "We do have independent financing in America," he told the London *Evening Standard*, "but a lot of it is tied to studios, so if you make a small-budget movie you run the risk of going through their accounting system, which is not built for low budgets." In the *Daily Telegraph*, Van Sant noted that "freedom comes from the financial set-up. All my last four films were made for $3 million. If you're willing to work at a

Jeff Wall, *Milk* (1984)

187 x 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

certain budget and the distributor or financier on a film gets a good deal, they'll be more willing to lighten up on control. But if the budget goes to, say, $10 million, that's when interference creeps in." In the case of *Paranoid Park*, the modest budget worked to the film's advantage, with the mix of amateurish and professional skating sequences setting off the enigmatic narrative.

"It wasn't like killing people was some bizarre event that never happened. Someone got killed on TV every two point five minutes. All you did in video games was kill people." Though Van Sant cut this line from the novel in his script, the idea permeates his film. What is the meaning of one death among so many? And is an unwitnessed incident the same as one you're caught at? *Paranoid Park* is a strikingly beautiful film, but its beauty is all about numbing, about shutting out what doesn't jibe with the smooth ride (or skate) American life is meant to be. In terms as oblique as those of his teenage protagonist, Van Sant outlines a society eager for sensation but unwilling to accept responsibility; a society in profound denial about the warfare on which, to a great extent, it depends; a society unwilling to see that, for the young, a great deal of the home front is little more than a mawkish Potemkin village.

MEGAN RATNER is at work on *The Little Book of Big Ideas: Film.*

ABSTRACT This review essay of Gus Van Sant's 2007 adaptation of Blake Nelson's novel about a teenage life in Portland, Oregon considers the film in terms of its depiction of U.S. life in wartime; its mixed-media aesthetic; and its disturbing representation of numbed-out adolescence.

KEYWORDS Van Sant, Blake Nelson, cinematic teenagers, Portland, Jeff Wall

CREDITS *Paranoid Park*. Director, editor: Gus Van Sant. Producers: David Cress, Charles Gilibert, Marin Karmitz, Nathanaël Karmitz, Neil Kopp. Screenplay: Gus Van Sant (from the novel by Blake Nelson). Cinematographers: Christopher Doyle, Rain Li. © 2007 MK2 Productions. U.S. distribution: IFC Films.

REDACTED'S DOUBLE VISION

KEN PROVENCHER REVIEWS BRIAN DE PALMA'S IMAGINARY, "MULTI-VISUAL" IRAQ DOCUMENTARY

During a Q&A with Brian De Palma following the U.S. premiere of *Redacted* at the 2007 New York Film Festival, an audience member asked if De Palma had consulted any U.S. soldiers or Iraqi civilians in the course of making the film. It was not a hostile question, and De Palma gave a straightforward answer ("yes" on both counts), but the suggestion was clear: one reaction to the film is to question its authenticity.

Redacted, in many ways, conditions that reaction. Along with recent Iraq War-themed films *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) and *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Redacted* exploits new media technology that puts digital video cameras in the hands of Army and National Guard soldiers. But whereas *In the Valley of Elah* and *Stop-Loss* integrate fake soldier-cam footage into a traditional third-person narrative, *Redacted* is an extended illusion much like *Cloverfield* and *Diary of the Dead* (both 2008), fantastical films restricted to the first-person digital-camera perspective. The conceit of the latter two films strains credibility: they rely on a viewer's suspension of disbelief in the likelihood that average people in mortal danger have the wherewithal to record their experience with any sort of visual clarity for minutes on end—by the time we see the footage, the camera operator is usually dead. *Redacted* teases out a similar disbelief, while remaining grounded in verifiable modes of reenactment. Its absurdities are a reflection, not a distortion, of its Internet-based source material.

Viewers acquainted with Iraq War documentaries, soldiers' camcorder footage, milblogs, YouTube, Al Jazeera, Sky News, and jihadis' websites are in a position to confirm just how well *Redacted* has simulated these forms. Those unfamiliar with that material need not go far: aggregate sites such as LiveLeak, infovlad.net, and Milblogging, among countless others, collect and sort footage and writings into a semblance of order. What is missing from most of those sites, however, is critical context; there is always the sense that no matter how spectacular or passionate the on-screen images and words, they represent only a fragment of truth. *Redacted* is just as fragmented and frustrating: instead of filtering the morass of the Iraq War through the monaural voice of pure documentary, it is multi-vocal and multi-visual—the impression of truth at twenty-four points of view per second. Ironically, De Palma faces accusations of factual inaccuracy in a film that never ceases to question its own veracity.

Redacted has a dual purpose: to dramatize incidents of atrocity in Iraq, and to challenge the authority of mediated content at a time of war. The film's central incident is based on a true case: the March 2006 rape and murder of a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and her family in Mahmoudiya by five U.S. Army soldiers, one of whom confessed to authorities several weeks later. Given the incident's depressing similarity to a Vietnam War atrocity reported by Daniel Lang for *The New Yorker* in 1969, *Redacted* is a companion piece to *Casualties of War* (1989), De Palma's dramatization of Lang's account. Unlike the earlier film, which aroused personal (and national) trauma from the light sleep of collective memory, *Redacted* shows the process of traumatic memorization. Photographic technology since Vietnam and the Gulf War has evolved to the level of near-instant reproduction and distribution. Enabled by the Internet, disseminated imagery of patrols, house raids, shootouts, aerial assaults, IED and sniper attacks, car bombings, and ritualistic beheadings have become part of the visual history of the Iraq War, even as it progresses. Atrocities play out in real time, roughly contextualized: "war" is now a do-it-yourself media clip show, with fresh images uploaded daily for curious clickers and browsers.

Redacted replicates the fragmented forms of new media to disturbing effect, mashing clips together to force a reaction from a powerless "userbase" audience. Watching the film is a uniquely odd experience. The narrative is linear, but despite the ever-present framing devices (logos, timecodes, hyperlinks, close-ups of transcripts), the viewer has no firm grounding in time or place, especially on first viewing. Every scene

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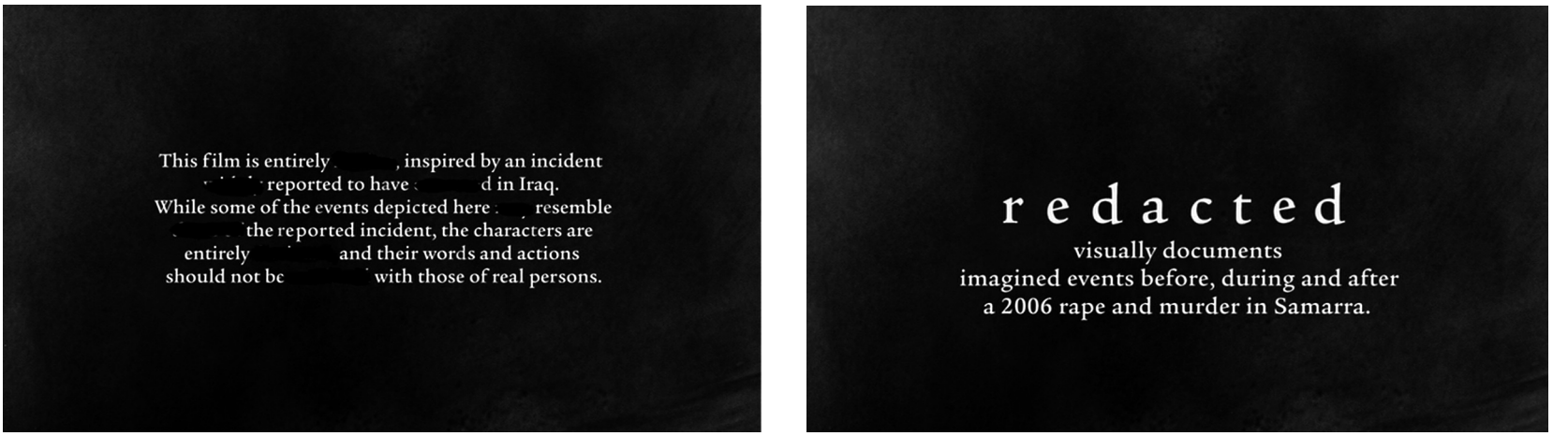
Brian De Palma on set

Redacted. Courtesy Optimum Releasing.

is a primary source clip, and every sequence edited by an unseen, unknown secondary source. Unable to control the digital image, the audience is locked into each scene's selection, duration, and transition to the next scene. Knowing that each and every clip will sooner or later switch to a different source, the viewer is constantly aware of the form; there is almost no immersion.

The main primary source is "Tell Me No Lies," the camcorder diary of PFC Salazar (Izzy Diaz), who hopes to earn himself a spot at USC film school with this tell-all documentary. Stationed in Samarra as part of a checkpoint unit—which includes SPC Lawyer McCoy (Rob Devaney), the burly SPC Rush (Daniel Stewart Sherman), wild card PFC Flake (Patrick Carroll), and bookworm PFC Blix (Kel O'Neil)—Salazar wants "the truth" on film, but the camera dictates his behavior, and that of his subjects. "You're gonna make some Commie rendition of our mission," Blix wonders, as Salazar trains the camera on him for a soundbite. The soldiers' words in these initial scenes are all tailored for the camera—before speaking on the record, Master Sgt. Sweet (Ty Jones) asks Salazar, "Aren't you supposed to say 'Action' or something?"—but in the backgrounds, where soldiers are not fully aware of the camera, and in the openness of their expressions and good humor, they appear to be relatively stable individuals. On video shot months later, after committing the most vicious, intimate war crimes imaginable, these same young soldiers look as if they have aged at least ten years, and lost a good portion of their humanity.

As we watch these early scenes from Salazar's diary, hunting for any kind of truth within, our suspicion mirrors that of the soldiers on duty. In a counterinsurgency campaign, a soldier's survival depends on disbelieving everything he sees. Accompanying the squad is a French documentary team ("Marc et François Clément"), who do not appear in Salazar's diary, but whose own footage is part of *Redacted*: a mournful mini-exposé of Iraq War policy called "Barrage" ("Checkpoint" in the subtitles). A French narrator (Julie Thiery) explicates the process of manning a checkpoint, and then questions it. Are the warning signs visible to Iraqis, many of whom are illiterate? Can soldiers discern the hostility of any Iraqis in the area, even women and children, who speak a different language and could easily be recruited by the insurgency?



Disclaimer, assertion

Redacted. © 2007 HDNet Films LLC. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

"Barrage" sympathizes (or appears to sympathize) with both the soldiers and the Iraqi civilians, while assuming an outsider stance of total condemnation. The layers of suspicion stack up visually: "Barrage" doubts the efficacy of the checkpoint as soldiers doubt the trustworthiness of the Iraqis surrounding them, and the viewer of *Redacted*, conditioned to question all that is seen, can only question "Barrage," which is a pompous work, scored with music by Handel, indulgent in its use of time-lapse photography, and lingering over soldiers' misbehavior, paranoia, and violence as if continually asserting its own superiority.

"Tell Me No Lies" is not just Salazar's appeal to his camera subjects; it is also the implicit appeal of an audience to any film posing as nonfiction. *Redacted* makes no such promises: its title card, appearing after a disclaimer that redacts itself before our eyes, explains that *Redacted* "visually documents imagined events before, during and after a 2006 rape and murder in Samarra." All we see is imagined, but *documented*. Each and every piece of footage is a lie that someone somewhere believes is authentic. The telling of the lie, the recording of the lie, and the reaction to the lie are three different processes. A strong example of this in *Redacted* is the checkpoint shooting of a car containing a pregnant woman (based on an actual May 2006 incident at a Samarra checkpoint). The driver rushes through the checkpoint without regard to the soldiers' repeated orders to stop. The "Barrage" team records the shooting itself; an Arab TV reporter follows the victim to the hospital and interviews the driver of the car. Flake, who had done most of the shooting, is at a loss for words in front of Salazar's camera afterwards, finally resorting to boilerplate racism, likening Iraqis to cockroaches he must exterminate. Sgt. Jim Ross (Mike Figueroa) interrupts, shouting at the camera, "He did his job!" That is the official, though callous, Army explanation, and by the recorded account of the French documentarians, it does appear that the car deliberately stormed the checkpoint's trigger line against soldiers' orders. But that is not the truth as the Arab TV Network (ATV) reports it: the driver claims the soldiers waved him through (using the Iraqi gesture for "welcome," which in America means "stop") before shooting at the car.

Here is the wonder of *Redacted's* format: an Iraqi perspective on the war that we do not encounter in mainstream media. The pregnant shooting victim arrives dead at the hospital, and we register the grief and bewilderment of the Iraqi driver from the position of Iraqis watching it on their televisions. ATV (obviously modeled on Al Jazeera) has its own media filters, of course, evidenced by the red-and-white "A" logo in the upper-right corner of the screen and on the microphone that the Arab journalist thrusts into the frame to conduct her interviews, but the words of the interview subjects are broadcast to their own community, subtitled for our benefit.

The cliché of most western films about military action abroad is to have an impressionable representative of the west lending a sympathetic ear to the victimized population, translating their suffering into western terms of moral outrage. In *Redacted*, a western audience is in the privileged (and imaginary) position of observing a community as it sees itself, without a single western voice lamely protesting the reduction of these victims to political or media signifiers. (The "Barrage" team is only interested in the checkpoint victim as an anti-war statistic; ATV actually gives us the woman's name.) The ATV logo is self-promotion as well as an authenticator for its Arab audience. *This* account of the checkpoint shooting is the only one that has currency for Iraqis, and it circulates to worldwide mass media as a minor scandal. It affects the soldiers at the checkpoint, dampening their spirits, but its effect on the local community is more significant—it provokes

deadly response. The soldiers' suspicion of all Iraqis, women and children included, fulfills its own prophecy, as an Iraqi child plants an IED that kills Sgt. Sweet.

The planting of the IED appears in *Redacted* as night-vision camcorder footage recorded by an Al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent and uploaded to a jihadi website. De Palma's framing of the footage is highly unusual in popular narrative cinema: the movie screen becomes a computer screen, with no character-viewer present to react dramatically to the video's contents. No human image is reflected, to show who is watching the clip, and nothing appears outside the borders of the web page to place the screen's monitor in any particular viewing space. We watch, fatalistically, as the IED is planted, and the next day, when it detonates. This is a potent technique for building narrative suspense (no bomber would upload the planting of a bomb that does not go off), but also an unsettling comment on the proliferation of Internet-provided snuff videos from the Iraq War. Though we have not clicked on this video to watch it, the implication is that we need to see it to understand not only where the IED came from, but how new media expose, and perhaps encourage, these "gotcha!" forms of violence. Out of boredom, loneliness, or a deranged sense of self-importance, combatants on both sides of the Iraq War set up cameras on their helmets, vehicles, or shoulders, and set about their tasks, unfettered by standards of journalistic integrity. As a result, we are able to obtain a far greater understanding of the physical reality of modern warfare. But what cannot be resolved is the latent *desire* in the act of recording.

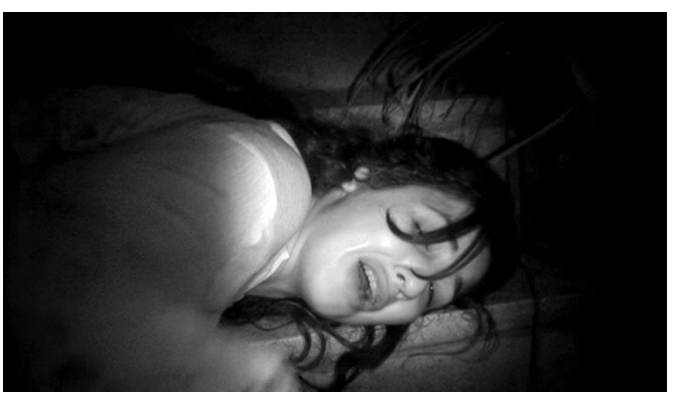
The only raw footage of the Iraq War (or any arena of large-scale combat) that attracts a wide viewership is footage of "something happening": gunfire, bodily harm, explosions. Camera angles and live sound determine a clip's watchability. Cinematic values are ingrained in every amateur videographer, and the results appear on YouTube and image forums where viewers can watch, rate, and comment. Salazar is consumed by a desire to capture a spectacular atrocity. Aware of the camera's inhibiting effect on his squadmates, he pretends to turn it off for the benefit of Rush and Flake, who are full of booze and rage over their dead sergeant. Despite McCoy and Blix's objections, they decide to raid a house they cleared earlier, for the sole purpose of raping Farah (Zahara Al Zubaidi), a fifteen-year-old girl living there with her mother, grandfather, and younger sister. Farah is Rush and Flake's ultimate conquest, and Salazar agrees to go along for no stated reason—though he steals a glance at his hidden camera and smiles. Salazar rigs a helmet-cam with night vision "so the boys don't get camera shy," and through his lens the entire incident unfolds. Rush holds down Farah and assaults her while Flake rounds up the rest of her family, and Salazar

Fake-within-a-fake

Redacted. © 2007 HDNet Films LLC. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

objects, like a frustrated film director, insisting that Flake should take Rush's place since it was all Flake's idea. Rush will not take direction and orders Salazar to hold down Farah's arm. Salazar the voyeur becomes Salazar the failed director, and finally an actor–participant. It is no small measure of *Redacted's* moral authority that even though the entire scene is shot from the point of view of a rapist, we neither identify with Salazar nor take pleasure in Farah's suffering.

How has this happened? The images of Sgt. Sweet's death by IED explosion, which Salazar recorded, have been playing over and over in Salazar's head, or so he tells an Army psychologist after the rape of Farah and the murder and immolation of her family. Flake and Rush had cooked up a cover story that the deaths were a Sunni vs. Shi'ite matter. Salazar does not betray them, but his guilt over Farah comes out in this faux-confession to the psychologist (caught on surveillance camera), as he blames Sgt. Sweet's death—actually the *video* of Sgt. Sweet's death—for his hatred of the Iraqis. The same could be said for the Iraqis with regard to the video of the pregnant woman gunned down earlier at the checkpoint, images that demanded a violent reprisal that was also recorded and broadcast on ATV and the Internet. *Redacted* conjoins the viral properties of "extreme" Internet video with the cyclical nature of bloody vengeance. On ATV, Farah's father rejects the official U.S. investigation of her death, promising "it will not be forgotten." Salazar is kidnapped (on video) and beheaded (on video) by Al-Qaeda operatives. The beheading video is their own handiwork, unsettling to watch, not the least because the familiar red logo of ATV (who are broadcasting it) is directly opposite the green "AK-47" logo of the Al-Qaeda group in the upper left corner of the screen. Who is branding what with those logos? The footage is an adequate simulation of execution videos provided to Arab media by Al-Qaeda post-9/11, only the actual videos are much more horribly graphic.



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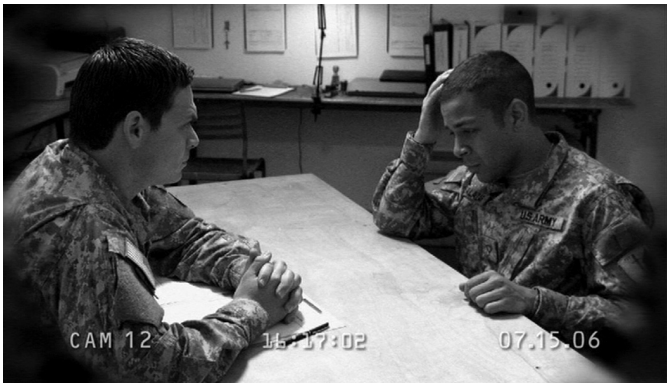
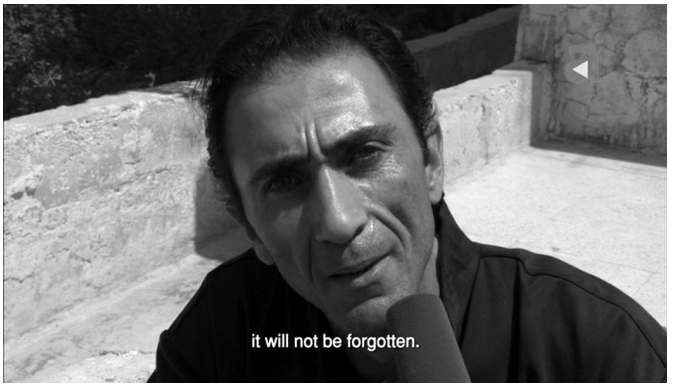
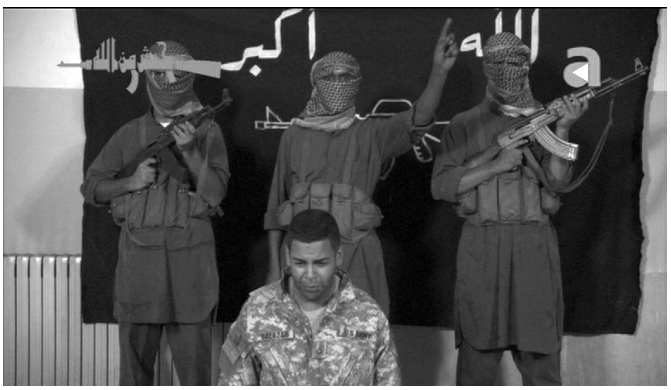
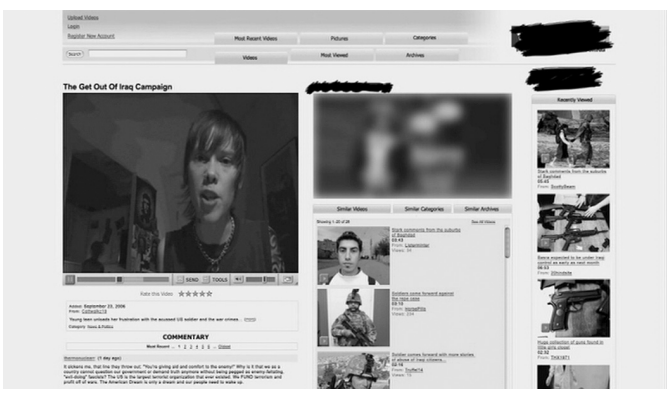
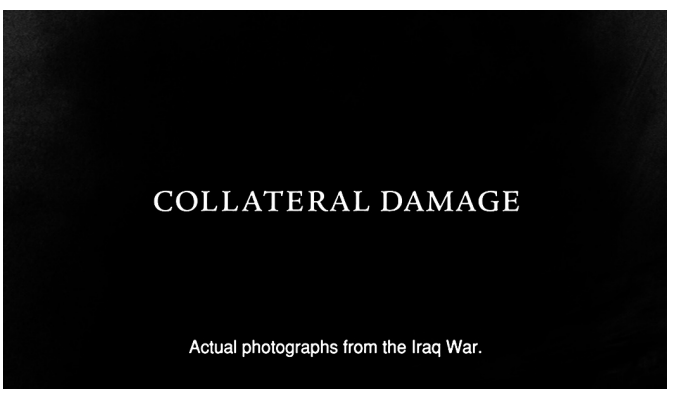
SIMULACRA OF ON-SCREEN OUTRAGE











Redacted. © 2007 HDNet Films LLC. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

De Palma's restraint here is understandable for two reasons: it secures an R rating for *Redacted*, and more importantly, it avoids a reactionary extremity of response. Accompanying just about every appearance of these snuff videos online is a disingenuous apology (the rhetorical sleight-of-hand can be summarized as: "Sorry to upset you, but we must educate ourselves in the evil practices of radical Islam") and posted viewer feedback to the effect of "This is why we must stay and fight in Iraq." The very explicitness of the footage sparks a primitive reaction. Authenticity, it seems, can cut both ways.

Near the end of *Redacted*, we see a YouTube rant delivered by an agitated teenage girl, who wants to give Farah's surviving relatives the opportunity to beat, maim, and torture Farah's killers, who are "monsters." The words are from a real website (credit goes to "Wild Bill blog"), and have murderous overtones, but the medium casts doubt on her capabilities. Words are her answer to violence. Is she a violent person outside the frames of the YouTube medium? It is impossible to tell. The Internet is not just a repository of organized information; it is an outlet for uncensored expression. In *Redacted*, we see how new media escalate violence, and also how they sublimate violence, or at least allow for uniquely personal condemnations of violence.

The last section of the film, a photomontage entitled "Collateral Damage," is a series of nineteen stills purported to be "Actual photographs from the Iraq War." We know they are actual photographs because the film's distributor, Magnolia Pictures, obscured the faces of the dead and wounded Iraqis in the pictures with black cross-out marks, citing an "untenable legal situation" with errors and omissions insurance. Believing he had prior approval of the photos, De Palma opened up legal proceedings against Magnolia, and declared in interviews and press conferences that Magnolia's insurance concerns were trumped up to appease the film's financier (and owner of Magnolia) Mark Cuban, who according to De Palma had been "disturbed" by the photos. Cuban has not reacted publicly to that charge (though he remained a public defender of the film against its most virulent detractors, particularly Bill O'Reilly), and the chain of decisions leading to the photo redactions may never transpire. But even if the montage were left unredacted per De Palma's intentions, it would not be above criticism.

The presentation of these "actual" photographs raises an ethical argument previously raised by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003): without names, dates, or locations captioning the photos, the subjects have no identity beyond their "exotic" victimhood. The majority of the photos have no narrative purpose; their effect is visceral and overwhelmingly sad. This is the abject despair at the heart of *Redacted*: not only do we have no control over the so-called "interactive" media on display, but we have no control over the mediated events themselves. The victims are "collateral damage" by nature of their non-identity. They are unintended targets—many of them infants and small children—and their suffering could be viewed as a function of chaos.

De Palma simultaneously complicates and clarifies the impact of the montage by inserting two staged photos: one of the pregnant woman shot to death at Salazar's checkpoint, and one of Farah that closes the montage—a young female corpse lying on a blood-stained floor of her house, eyes and mouth wide open in a rictus of pain. Because the images are unredacted, they betray their own falseness, and yet the stark effectiveness of the final photo overrides any viewer confusion over what is "actual" and what is not. De Palma prolongs the exposure of the "Farah" image (shot by New York photographer Taryn Simon), and zooms in on it slowly, synchronizing it with a climactic musical underscore from Puccini's *Tosca*. (If this is pretentious, then it is faithful to the pretensions of countless other Iraq War musical photomontages on the Internet.) Like the anonymous creator of the website legofesto.blogspot.com, who rendered with Lego figures the entire rape and murder of Abeer Qassim Hamza (the actual Mahmoudiya victim), De Palma uses this final photo to illustrate a crime whose mediation was initially the exclusive property of criminals. Only they knew how she appeared as a victim, and only they had that image burned into their memories.

With *Redacted*, De Palma seizes the power of mediation from those who commit atrocities, and renders those same atrocities in such a way that it condemns brutality without ever congratulating itself or its audience. This is a masterpiece of ambivalence, self-critical and unclouded.

KEN PROVENCHER is a Critical Studies Ph.D. student at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. He acknowledges the USC Provost Fellowship Program for its support in the preparation of this article.

ABSTRACT Brian De Palma's *Redacted* borrows the forms of Internet video to dramatize incidents of atrocity in the Iraq War, and to question the limitations, and culpability, of new media at a time of war. The film's multifaceted approach conditions the viewer to doubt the substance and nature of its images.

KEYWORDS digital video, dramatization, Internet, Iraq War, new media

CREDITS *Redacted.* Director, screenplay: Brian De Palma. Producers: Jason Kliot, Simone Urdl, Joana Vicente, Jennifer Weiss. Cinematographer: Jonathon Cliff. Editor: Bill Pankow. © 2007 HDNet Films LLC. U.S. distribution: Magnolia Pictures. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

FILM CULTURE IN CHENNAI

LALITHA GOPALAN REPORTS ON SCREENINGS AND CINEMA INSTITUTIONS IN THE TAMIL NADU CAPITAL

There is something soothingly familiar about Madras when I arrive in early August 2007. The hot, dusty weather, coupled with the fast repartee in Tamil flying across busy roads, welcome me to my city, my home in India. It is the city I know so well, as intimately as Washington, D.C., the other city where I have lived for more than a decade. While Madras has been renamed Chennai and I do use that new moniker for all official transactions, it will always be Madras for me in every other realm, the lovely hard consonants reverberating with its fiercely fast-paced urban dialect, an alchemy of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and so many additional linguistic forces that energize this city's life. Chennai in its current resurgence is a global techno-center, a hub for outsourced labor. For an eternity, as Madras, however, it has been the epicenter of Carnatic music and Bharatnatyam dance. For years, the music season was in the rainy months of December and January, but during the last five years or so, with the onset of global warming and liberalization, music and dance festivals have become year-long phenomena undeterred by heat spells and cheered on by visiting former residents such as myself. Whereas classical culture has only recently altered its allegiances to seasons, the film industry has never heeded the vagaries of weather; the sweltering heat has never stopped the denizens of Kodambakkam (the center of film studios in Chennai) from committing to film shoots or post-production schedules. It is the well-oiled machine that allows one to state ad nauseam that Madras is the center of southern Indian film production and cinema culture. Here in the state capital of Tamil Nadu, scriptwriters, lyricists, and film stars have moved back and forth between the glitz of film and the showmanship of politics with an ease that should have long ago had the heirs of the Frankfurt School establish a permanent school of critical theory on the marina.

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My first stop is at Madras Talkies, Mani Ratnam's office. On being pressed to list films I should watch, Ratnam recommends *Paruthiveeran* (2007) as a must-see film; he adds that I should check out a Telugu film, *Vanaja* (2007), doing the rounds at the festival, but he says he has not had a chance to check it out. (On my return to Austin, I will discover that *Vanaja*'s minor success on the festival circuit remains highly undeserved, but it is not a story worth pursuing.) Within days of my visit to Madras Talkies it becomes apparent to me that *Paruthiveeran* has acquired a reputation among cinephiles: a rave reception at the Osians Cinefan Festival in New Delhi and a special mention award at the Berlin Film Festival. My co-conspirator for a day, Swarnavel Pillai, who accompanies me as we bounce from one film studio to another says that it is visually memorable and I find out later that a group of edgy filmmakers in Mumbai have been quietly promoting it. But seeing *Paruthiveeran* in Madras proves to be quite a challenge. The English dailies have slim listings of films to begin with, and the Tamil newspapers are notoriously opaque about locations and show times. After a couple of botched trips, my friend Ayisha Abraham and I nail down a screening at eleven o'clock in the morning at Baby Albert in Egmore. This addition to an older theater is located in what one can only describe as a seedy neighborhood, close to the regional train station built in the colonial era.

To say that *Paruthiveeran* is worth two trips is an understatement. Set in rural Tamil Nadu, it is a sadomasochistic love story focused on a girl who is determined to marry her childhood sweetheart despite opposition from her parents. Flashback sequences of an intractable blood feud between the two families can barely keep up with the sharp dialogue that slices through panoramic shots or exacerbates, at times, the rapid editing. Although evoking the feudal relationships of rural Tamil Nadu, the film has none of the pastoral ambience of the "nativity films" of the 1970s. Rather it reminds one of the melodrama in *Duel in the Sun* (1946), the escalating violence of Peckinpah's border Westerns, and the operat-

Students working at Prasad Studios

Courtesy L. V. Prasad Film and TV Academy

ics of Vishal Bharadwaj's Hindi heartland Westerns, *Maqbool* (2004) and *Omkara* (2006). Unlike these other films, though, *Paruthiveeran* has little patience with the compositional stillness of panoramic shots or the rapid pace of editing in analog predicated on sequencing. Rather, it deploys digital effects to expand the frame both vertically and horizontally so as to spatialize violence; this is cruel cinema in its essence, its brutality unmitigated by viewing a morning show in a theater with a diminutive name.

There is every reason to dwell on *Paruthiveeran*'s accomplishments since the summer's biggest box-office hit in Tamil cinema, *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007), produced by AVM Studios and starring "Superstar" Rajinikant, has eclipsed consideration of other films. Given the cagey accounting practices of unlisted film companies in India, it is impossible to pin down the exact production and box-office numbers, so an approximate figure is all one can muster. According to trade reports in *Business Today*, the film's production budget was approximately rupees 80 crores; box-office figures yielded rupees 200 crores, and a similar amount was earned through merchandising. To mark the diamond jubilee of AVM Studios, *Sivaji* was released simultaneously in Tamil Nadu and Hong Kong and was listed in the U.K.'s Top 10 on the first weekend of its release, June 15. Its global reception was instantly attributed to Shankar's directorial abilities, Rajinikant's fan following, state-of-the-art computer graphics, and so on, but it is worth noting that the real superstar here was AVM's publicity blitz, which pummeled the reception of every other film, flooding the market and theaters with its film and attendant movie accessories. There is nothing new about this studio's PR machine, which has viciously guarded the distribution of its products in the last decade, but we should indeed be

Cruel cinema

Paruthiveeran. Photos: C. H. Balu.

surprised that a small film such as *Paruthiveeran* could even muster a run at a theater, not considering the critical acclaim that it has steadily accrued. For all its hype, *Sivaji*'s flimsy storyline can barely move beyond its razzmatazz. Simulacrum piled upon simulacrum does not allow for critical distance or admiration; the film encourages juvenile mockery as the only spectatorial response.

Keeping a safe distance from the overzealous publicity of the front office at AVM, I head off to the backlots, where the work of making films is well underway. I never leave Madras without dropping in on P. C. Sriram's sets, which have consistently served as a vantage point from which to view the current state of cinematographic practice, a perspective that is laced with P. C.'s own cynicism about the illusory effects of cinema. But this visit is an occasion of intense loss: P. C.'s colleague and former assistant Jeeva suffered cardiac arrest and died while shooting in Russia in June.

Jeeva's wife, Anees, and P. C. are directing a scene for the incomplete *Dham Dhoom*. Slipping quietly into the warehouse-like space of Studio 16, Pillai and I stand behind a tangle of wires on the shooting floor, wires that are connected to arc lights trained on the set and to whirring fans cooling the actors and workers. The set is abuzz with activity: tea boys are running back and forth and a stream of instructions flows down the line from first assistant to second assistant till it reaches an army of gofers whose only task seems to be to run hither and thither. Despite the chaos surrounding the set, at the center is an icy calm, which is matched by a mock-up of an icescape. We have walked into a fight sequence between the Indian (read: buff Punjabi supporting actor) and a foreigner (read: black man) set against the backdrop of pristine white snow-capped landscape (read Styrofoam in the back lots of AVM). P. C. and Anees supervise a number of takes while the actors try to imitate the stunt master's instructions to duck, flip, and swing punches. P. C. periodically retires to the TV monitors for a quick rewind. I note the distinct absence of Hong Kong-style wire stunts, but there is no doubt

Director Ameer Sulthan

Paruthiveeran. Photo: C. H. Balu.

that when P. C. is done with the shoot, the dull surface of the Styrofoam will mimic a glistening winter landscape in Russia, blurring the difference between location shoots and studio sets.

The magic of seeing a film shoot unfortunately casts a pall over other cinema- related activities. I knew I would experience this familiar disappointment with the finished product after getting a peek into working of the apparatus, so to counteract it, I decide to visit Prasad Film Academy across the road, inside the sprawling Prasad Studios. Driving through a convoy of vans carrying film equipment and back-up batteries, I reach the academy, located at the far end of the lot, which formerly housed several studio floors. Heading the academy is K. Hariharan, a Madras-based film director trained at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) whose personal ties to Kodak—his father was the chief representative of the American company in Bombay—may have fortified his collaboration with Prasad Studios, the standard bearers for innovations in color-processing, sound-mixing, and cinematographic technologies for more than four decades. Since Hariharan graduated from FTII, his years in Madras have included directing offbeat Tamil films and producing commercials, but more importantly he has nurtured a film culture by heading the Chennai Film Society, writing film reviews, and lecturing on Indian cinema in America. His commitment to film education obviously makes him the right choice for the L.V. Prasad Film and TV Academy (founded in 2004) whose curriculum includes courses in directing and scriptwriting as well as an exposure to global cinema. Hariharan insists that he agreed to head the academy only on the condition that his students would commit to testing their mettle as filmmakers and not just settle immediately for careers as technicians in international film units. This directive to students is not unwarranted, given a rash of film schools in Chennai and elsewhere that are churning out cinematographers and editors who are headed to join the ranks of second units for one traveling film production unit or another, often working at half the wages of

Director Chetan Shah (center)

Framed. © Rawfilm.

their counterparts in the west. Hariharan's idealism, however anachronistic, is a welcome antidote to the fizzy mantra of global film production where co-productions are the order of the day, along with the frothy tales of love and travel that are standard Bollywood fare. The ethos of the Prasad Academy seems like an offshoot of the state idealism of post-colonial India that initiated institutions such as the FTII to produce quality cinema rather than endorsing graduates from vocational or trade schools whose only aspiration is to join the ranks of techno-coolies. But as we tour the facilities—the state-of-the-art editing rooms, the cavernous studios on the ground floor where one mingles with the ghostly presence of past shoots, and the well-stocked library—Hariharan is quick to distance himself from the FTII charter and to suggest that the L. V. Prasad Academy is not interested in regurgitating the tired differences between popular cinema and art cinema. If the academy does not exactly harbor the nationalistic idealism of FTII, there is no doubt that the studio's longstanding commitment to innovation in film technology is an additional allure for students who are assured of unrestricted access to Prasad Color Labs for processing their student films. I realize that the academy has little truck with the ideals of the post-war national film school, but it nevertheless inculcates an old-fashioned professionalism, a throwback to the American studio system in the classical era. And despite Hariharan's injunction, there is little doubt that the students will be absorbed into the large studio machinery upon their graduation.

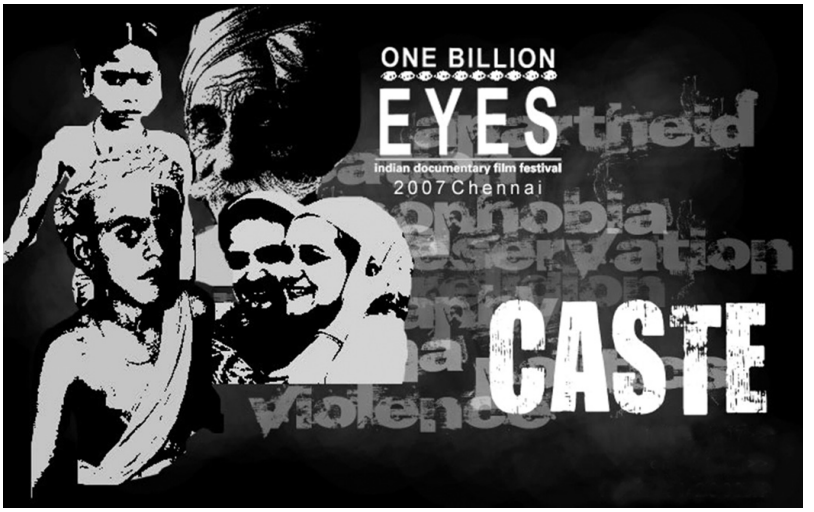
Mid-August is also open season for nationalism in all its guises: pageantry, seminars, and film screenings crowd the schedule of events, and the sixtieth year of independence provides an additional gloss on the run-up to August 15. Gandhi is enjoying a renaissance in Hindi cinema clothed in a newfound nationalism fit for an era of global consumerism, *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Gandhi My Father* (2007), and the *Munnabhai* (2003–) films are the most obvious points of reference. Tamil cinema has had only a fleeting relationship with Gandhi, but Gandhian ideals have long enjoyed a quiet longevity in the well-established nexus between Theosophical Society, the Krishnamurthy Foundation, and Kalakshetra in Madras. As the premiere arts academy that sought to wrest the classical tradition of Bharatnatyam away from temple dancers and sanitize it for the nationalist bourgeoisie, Kalakshetra has emerged as a laboratory for experiments in dance theory and performance. In the quiet woods of the academy, I join a reverential crowd who have come there only by virtue of word-of-mouth channels to watch rarely seen footage from A. K. Chettiar's film *Mahatma Gandhi: Twentieth Century Prophet*. Like most documentary films from the colonial period, this one has a compelling lost-and-found story which V. R. Devika of the Prakriti Foundation recounts in her introduction to the screening. Recently transferred from analog to digital, the images we were about to watch represent a shortened version of the original 1940 two-hour Tamil film that is still missing. On a trip to locate the reported original film, historian A. R. Venkatachalapathy stumbled upon this fifty-minute version in America, trimmed down from the eighty-one-minute Hollywood version that circulated in 1953. Sinking into a wicker chair, I am hypnotized by the range of footage that Chettiar culled from actualities produced by various colonial-era film units: Gandhi with Jinnah, Gandhi marching, Gandhi in London, Gandhi at rallies and protests, and so on. Gandhi's tenacity and grace seem so palpable in these images where the camera cannot help but keep him in focus. There is of course none of the near-caricatural make-up used in recent film depictions of Mahatma. Stirring out of the spellbinding space of the black-and-white footage, Ayisha and I stroll onto the verandah and then into the woods of Kalakshetra, which are bathed in a sepia-toned light, its ambience out of sync with the digital revolution outside its gates.

Software headquarters and call centers dot the landscape of Chennai, and techno-highways and corridors have remapped the city whose geographical frontiers now extend southwards toward Pondicherry and north toward Chingleput.

Not surprisingly, cinematic technologies exist well beyond the Kodambakkam row of studios; recording and mixing studios flourish atop grocery stores, and cybercafés offer every casual user of the computer the possibility of dabbling in filmmaking. Small is beautiful, a dated Gandhian ideal via Schumacher, finds a second life in low-budget films that find their way through the alleys of microchips to screening locations. Chetan Shah's English-language film *Framed* is one such gem that was calling to a different viewer, a viewer tired of stars and big-budget films. Shah has spent years earning his stripes at Prasad Studios, and as a director and producer for hire for documentary units in Tamil Nadu, while nurturing his cinephilia by programming films for the Madras Club. A small-budget film with nods and winks to the filmmaking process, *Framed* (2007) banks on the multiplex audiences recently accustomed to quirky films (a delayed indie moment for Indian cinema). I watched *Framed* long before its release in late August, at Chetan's place, a preview before the preview. Both trailer and film are in dialogue with recent English-language films produced in Bombay or by non-resident Indians (NRIs). *Framed* not only enjoyed a theatrical release but was part of the screening program of the newly established Indian Independent Filmmakers Foundation which organized a film festival and seminar in Madras in a concerted effort to encourage the production and distribution of alternative, smaller films. The hip quirkiness of the event collapsed spatial and temporal differences for me—I might as well have been in Austin, Texas, watching the film with the slacker crowd at the Alamo Drafthouse.

If we are in the process of recognizing movements and marking shifts in filmmaking practices in India, the biggest splash belongs to documentary films that have embraced the digital technology as a weapon to battle a range of social injustices—an updated version of Kino-Eye. But it is only recently that independent documentary films have enjoyed such a wider audience; realism is becoming fashionable. The Prakriti Foundation's annual documentary film festival One Billion Eyes, still in its infancy, has already earned a reputation as a destination for both filmmakers and viewers; the competitive, award-granting film festival has put it on the map for budding filmmakers.

After having had my fill of struggling filmmakers, orphaned films, festival awards, and tight budgets, I developed a sneaking suspicion that the alternative film scene had stolen a march on the big-budget films that are released on Pongal in mid-January with unmitigated fanfare. Was this really the Madras where the glamor of showmanship was most evident in the careers of male stars that wed cinema and politics? Repairing for a drink at the Park Hotel built on the grounds of the former Gemini Studios, I was relieved to see walls and walls of loud film posters that the interior designers had placed to remind us of the former owners' Madras bailiwick. I was very conscious of a sense of transformation. On the way out, I stopped at the upscale boutique in the lobby to gawk at cushion covers with screen prints of former film star M. G. Ramachandran. The immensely successful actor had made an easy transition to political life with a populist agenda. I succumbed to the desire to purchase one. Ramachandran's gaudy, flashy films with uplifting messages for his fans who doubled as political cadres now seem untimely and anachronistic, but the a boom in high-end kitsch in India has seen him repackaged for the elite. His face, thick with pink make-up, seemed strangely benign on the cushion cover, memorialized forever as an expensive decoration whose price would have at one point bought an entire front stall.



The One Billion Eyes festival poster

Time to leave. Time to leave Madras Talkies, Madras Cotton, Madras Cricket Club, Madras Christian College. Time to arrive in Chennai.

LALITHA GOPALAN teaches in the Department of Radio-Television-Film, University of Texas at Austin.

ABSTRACT A survey of cinema activities in Chennai, capital of Tamil Nadu province, south India, covering: film releases, production facilities, film schools, archival screenings, and the city's emerging role as a techno-center.

KEYWORDS Indian cinema, Bollywood, Mani Ratnam, Madras, *Paruthiveeran*

THE RHYTHMS OF LIFE: AN APPRECIATION OF MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI, EXTREME AESTHETE OF THE REAL

JAMES S. WILLIAMS ANALYZES THE EXPERIMENTAL METHOD OF ONE OF EUROPEAN ART CINEMA'S KEY AUTEURS

A year after Antonioni's death, the need to view the totality of his work afresh without simply expressing awe at the exceptional beauty of his austere compositions, or else resorting to the outdated clichés of the post-religious Marxist existentialist of modern alienation and ennui, becomes ever more urgent. Such big themes were, of course, encouraged by Antonioni himself when he presented *L'avventura* at Cannes in 1960 and outlined his major preoccupations: modern man weighed down by old values and myths and afflicted by sick Eros, the heterosexual couple exhausted and in crisis, the failure of sexuality as a means of communication and resolution of the moral dilemma, and so on. These ideas still dictate to a large extent how Antonioni's work is considered, in particular the films that heralded his dramatic shift to a new and pioneering form of modernism. The stunning transformation achieved by *L'avventura* with its oblique, slow-moving, and open-ended narrative of apparently disconnected events, extended long takes, and formal "errors"—this is the moment when Antonioni became "Antonioni"—was sealed by the works that followed in quick succession, each one more daring than the last: *La notte* (1961), *L'eclisse* (1962), and *Red Desert* (1964). Together these four momentous films formed an undisputed (pre-)climax to the *oeuvre*, its "Great Tetralogy," on which Antonioni's reputation still largely rests.

Any attempt to reassess Antonioni's work in its entirety—the results of a career spanning over sixty years—is beset by difficulty when one notes that much of it is still not commercially available, in particular his earlier formative features. This is largely because he was not able to realize the majority of his work for a single, state-subsidized production company, with the result that the film rights were dispersed around the world. It means, for example, that *Red Desert* is available in the U.S. only in a severely cropped early edition from Image Entertainment, and the universally panned *Zabriskie Point* (1970) has only just this year become available. *Story of a Love Affair* (1950), *The Girlfriends* (1955), *The Cry* (1957), *Blowup* (1966), *The Passenger* (1975), and most recently (in the U.K. at least) *Identification of a Woman* (1982), are all now available on DVD but in editions of varying quality. There are some notable exceptions: the Criterion Collection has issued two superb digitally restored DVDs of *L'avventura* and *L'eclisse*, while *La notte* has just been excellently restored by Eureka in a version that incorporates previously censored sequences. In France *Red Desert* has been recently reissued by Carlotta Films in an immaculate, scholarly DVD boxed set that also includes Antonioni's first feature *Story of a Love Affair* (1950), the rarely seen *The Lady without Camellias* (1953), and two important early shorts: *N.U.* (1948), which catalogues the daily routine of Rome's street sweepers, and *Seven Reeds, One Suit* (1949), about the manufacture of rayon. No collection yet exists, however, of Antonioni's short films that bookend his *oeuvre* (nearly twenty in all if one counts his contributions to compilation films), from his first work, *Gente del Po* (1943–47) about the impoverished residents of the Po valley, to *Michelangelo's Gaze* (2004), a simple and moving account of Antonioni's visit to Michelangelo's tomb of Julius II in Vincoli (included as an extra on the American DVD of *The Passenger*). The only way currently to see *Chung Kuo Cina* (1972), his remarkable 220-minute documentary about contemporary life in China, is on *You Tube* in twenty-one installments.[1]

THE PERSONAL OBJECTIVE

I would like to focus here not on Antonioni's declared themes and philosophy but on his experimental method and practice in order to establish the major artistic continuities of his work, in particular its documentary aspects which are often downplayed. I begin with a less well-known moment in his career, an interview he gave to Gideon Bachmann in *Film Quarterly* in 1975, three years after his crushing denunciation by the Chinese for *Chung Kuo Cina*.[2] Antonioni reveals here why

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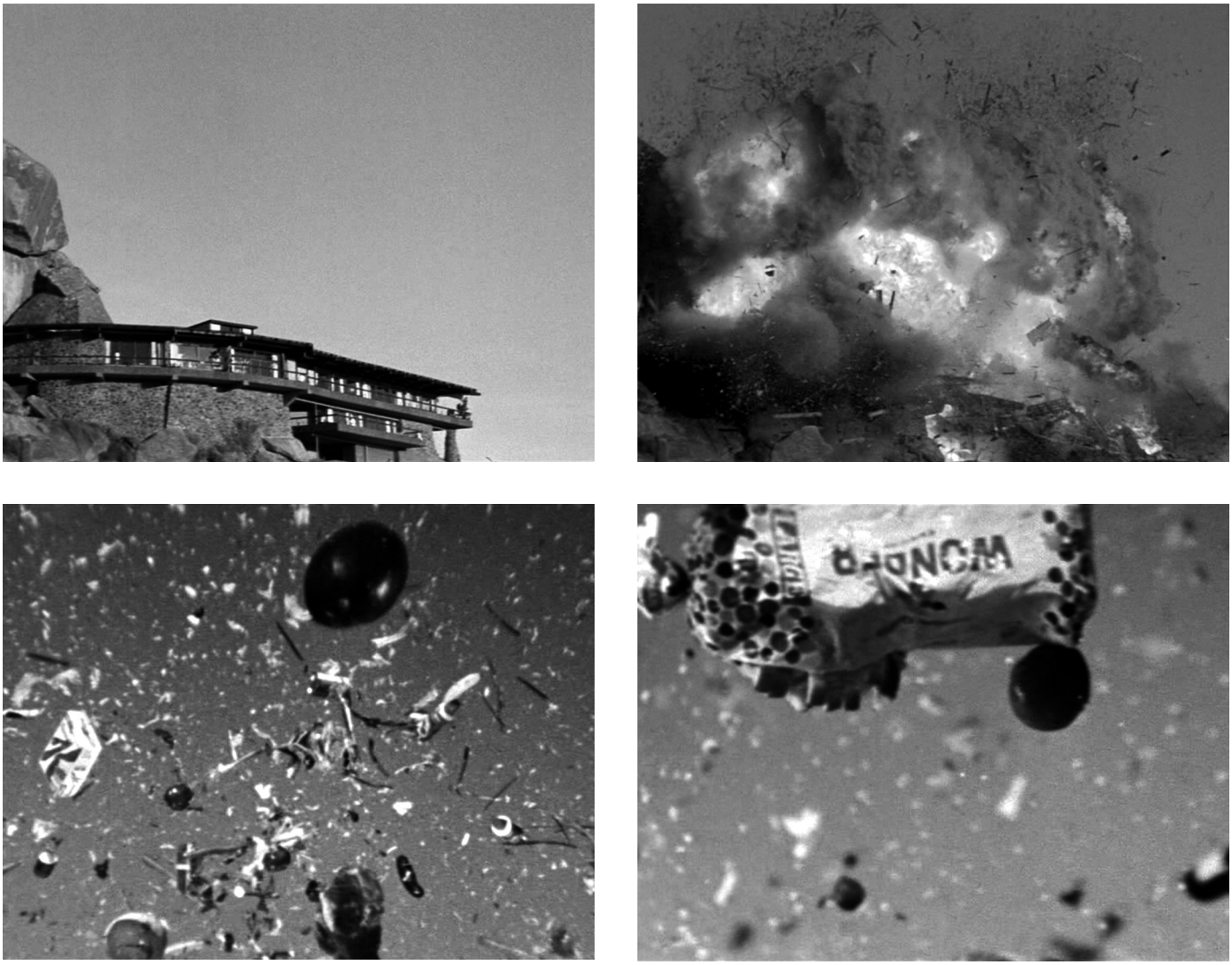


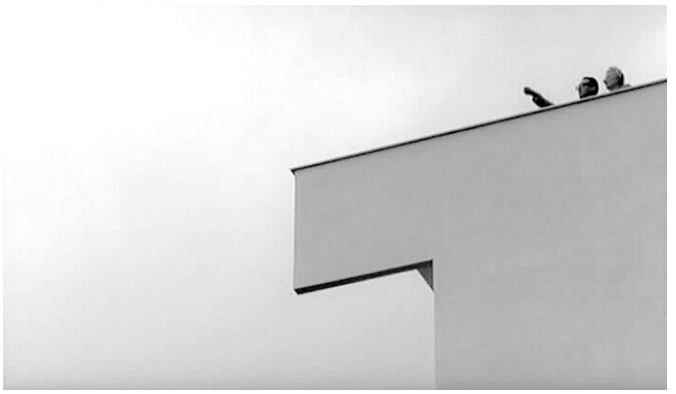
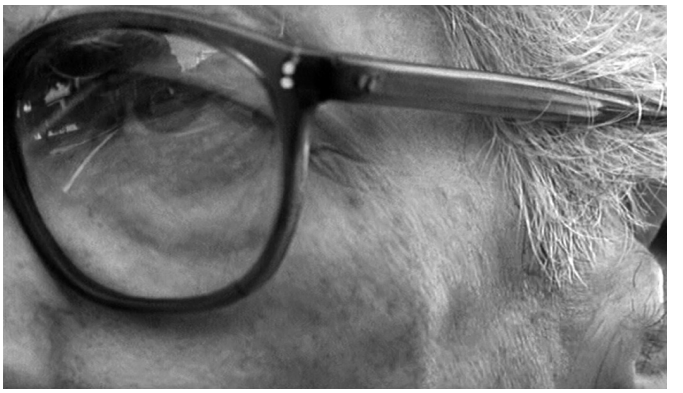
Objects becoming floating forms

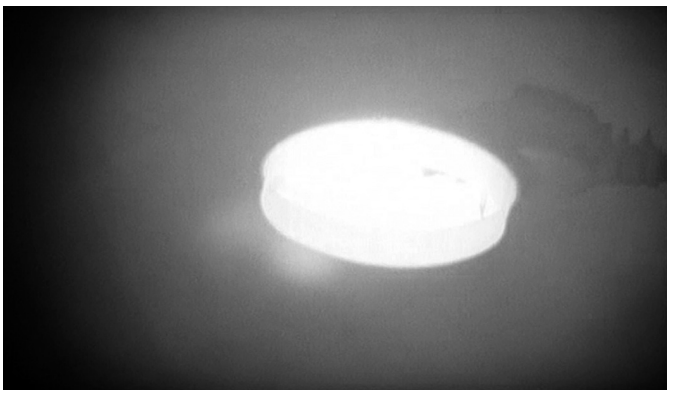
Zabriskie Point. © 1970 Turner Entertainment Co. DVD: kabel eins (Germany).

he could never consider himself an "objective," still less scientific, filmmaker. He discounts any pretension to scientific objectivity because, he claims, this would occlude the vital "dialectic of life." In *Chung Kuo Cina* he had sought to record every aspect of Chinese life from birth to death while resisting the limits imposed by his Chinese hosts and their demand for simply positive words and images. Armed only with a handheld camera he thus zoomed in on whatever incidents or objects solicited his interest on the streets of Beijing, along the Yangtze river and harbor at Shanghai, among the crowds visiting the Great Wall, or in the homes of citizens. Subtitles are deliberately avoided, but voiceover is used when required, for example, to explain signs and slogans, or else to make the odd personal (at times even a little barbed and patronizing) comment about Chinese society. There is thus a highly subjective and often arbitrary air to the film which takes to a new level Antonioni's experimentation in unmotivated camera movement. He argues in the interview that an "objective camera" is one freely wielded by the director, as opposed to the subjective function of point-of-view shots. Yet in characteristically autocratic fashion he goes even further when he states his attraction to new color video technology: "What counts is the reality that ends up on the screen. My reality."[3] This approach is, of course, what led Antonioni to interfere aesthetically with reality while always laying claim to cinematic "sincerity" (for example, making London more "real" than London in *Blowup* by coating the roads a darker black, or in *Zabriskie Point* spraypainting the bodies of the couples strewn across Death Valley). This artificial enhancement of reality is derived ironically from Antonioni's artistic investment in the Real rather than negation of it, and it required him to place his faith completely in the moment of filming. At once fastidious and intuitive, he would use the viewfinder to devise meticulous framings on the spot, thus

Top six: *La notte*. © 1961 Nepi Film/Silver Films/Sofitedip. DVD: Eureka Entertainment. Bottom two: *L'eclisse*. © 1962 StudioCanal Image. DVD: Optimum Releasing (U.K.).

L'ECLISSE: FROM SHADOWS TO SUNDOWN



L'eclisse. © 1962 StudioCanal Image. DVD: Optimum Releasing.

making the shoot a nervous process for all involved (his films, he once stated, are "a thought in the making"). Antonioni left nothing to chance in his wish to make us "see" and respond to the Real—his Real.

Antonioni's highly ambivalent aesthetic attitude to documentary reality was already visible at the beginning of his career. The nine-minute *Gente del Po* which marked him out as a neo-realist *avant la lettre* provided such devastating views of the harshness of country life, including the catastrophe inflicted by a storm, that the government agency LUCE refused to accept it (much of the original footage was either lost or destroyed). Yet paradoxically, for those post-war leftist critics who saw the film when it eventually appeared in 1947, *Gente del Po* was also "decadent" since it broke the new cinematic rules of neo-realism. After all, we never actually see the social and economic interconnections which might serve to place the peasants within a historically determined political context. Instead, Antonioni's camera regularly abandons his characters in order to focus on the ephemeral formal beauties of the river Po overwhelmed by mist. *Gente del Po* was followed by *N.U.* which indicated how far Antonioni would move beyond the confines and ideals of neo-realism. He edited it, he later explained, as a series of poetic images that flowed, and we already glimpse here his attention to what surpasses the human figure: the urban landscape, architectural perspectives, and the play of natural elements. By the time Antonioni made *Story of a Love Affair* he had effectively arrived at a second stage of neo-realism, focusing on the mysteries of individual psychology rather than the characters' physical plights. Subsequent works would take to an extreme a central feature of neo-realism: the detachment of space from its locking into narrative intrigue and desire. Yet while neo-realism sought in neo-Marxian terms to make landscape the focus of social and political struggle, Antonioni explored increasingly the aesthetic effects of landscape on the psychological state of the protagonists, in the process making landscape the setting for an exploration of the experience of modernity.

DOCUMENTARY VS. MELODRAMA

Despite Antonioni's deep concerns about scientific logic and any objective representation of reality, in purely formal terms his work is always defined by a clear tension between what I would call on the one hand a documentary impulse, and on the other a drive towards fiction pushed at times to the level of melodrama. The first tendency is represented by his avowedly documentary shorts on subjects ranging from superstitious practices in rural Italy to cable cars, Sicily, and, in the mock-documentary short, *L'amorosa menzogna* (1949), the making of a *fumetto*, or "photo romance" in comic-book style. It also encompasses diverse works like *Suicide Attempt* (1953—part of a compilation film called *Love in the City* comprising interviews with people who had attempted to take their lives and failed) and *The Vanquished* (1952), a fascinating, if flawed, series of three short fictional films about juvenile delinquency set in highly realistic locations in Paris, Rome, and London. Antonioni's fictional tendency pervades to varying degrees all his feature films, in particular early works such as *Story of a Love Affair* starring Lucia Bosé in the torrid tale of a married woman's fatal renewal of an old love affair, and *The Lady without Camellias*, which, while exhibiting odd moments of neo-realist intensity in its passing views of the urban poor and its portrayal of the bleak "other world" of Cinecittà, builds up to dizzying peaks of high melodrama with its story of the rise and fall of a young salesgirl, Clara Manni (again played by Bosé). In fact, however hollowed-out and experimental Antonioni's works become, they always constitute fictions since they present characters in artificial situations. As Antonioni himself put it, his primary interest lies in the moment when the context or environment suddenly takes on "relief." Which is to say, his hybrid narratives marked by temporal disjunction, disorientation, black holes, ellipses, and a lack of resolution serve to provide just enough justification for human figuration, however "unnaturally" heightened and stylized, to take hold. This recourse to melodrama, broadly defined, offered Antonioni a means of short-circuiting and sculpting the Real in slowed-down, distended form in order to capture it as a series of *tableaux vivants*.

As Angela Dalle Vacche has argued of *Red Desert* with reference to Peter Brooks's theory of melodrama, it is clear how close melodrama actually is to neo-realism when one recognizes that both genres are characterized by a certain muteness in their construction of character that relies more on gesture and mimicry, landscape, and architecture, than on dialogue and introspection.[4] Melodrama is similarly concerned with the personal mediation of extreme emotional and moral conditions produced during a period of historical upheaval, in Antonioni's case the generalized trauma of Italy's rush for modernization. With his loyal team of brilliant technicians that included the cinematographers Gianni di Venanzo and Carlo di Palma, the editor Eraldo da Roma, and the composer Giovanni Fusco who provided the soundtrack to nearly all his features up to *Red Desert*, Antonioni sought to visualize and critique Italy's post-war economic miracle which saw large sections of the population displaced and the landscape disfigured. The frenetic, dehumanizing world of the Roman stock market in free fall in *L'eclisse* was the perfect symbol of a society in massive transition and confusion

L'avventura. © 1960 Cine Del Duca Films/Produzioni Cinematografiche Europee/Société Cinématographique Lyre. DVD: Mr Bongo (U.K.).

(moral, political, and religious), a fact highlighted earlier in the same film by the virtually static, silent figures of the black workers at the Verona aerodrome (to be contrasted with the earlier grotesque moment when Vittoria dons blackface to indulge in exoticist fantasies of Africa). The moronic circus that builds up around the self-styled celebrity "writer" and prostitute Gloria Perkins in *L'avventura* exemplifies the increasing degradation and vacuity of both private and public life.

Antonioni was always searching in his work for a balance between documentary and fictional extremes which, when not carefully integrated, could sometimes create two films within one. One thinks most obviously of the exciting *cinéma-vérité* style of the opening scenes of *Zabriskie Point* with the debates between students and black militants, followed by the florid and unconvincing tale of Daria (Daria Halprin) and Mark (Mark Frechette) on the run from the police (an unrewarding discontinuity not helped by the fact that both actors were nonprofessional). The resolution to these two formal movements, one which Antonioni never attained, was probably science fiction, a genre that inspired him enough to write a script. Yet signs of this abiding interest can be found throughout his work, from his depiction in *L'eclisse* of the E.U.R. district in Rome as a lunar-like landscape complete with mushroom tower, to the pyrotechnical conclusion of *Identification of a Woman* where the protagonist Niccolò (Tomas Milian) fantasizes a journey to the sun in a spaceship formed of a decayed asteroid in order to study material matter (we see model asteroids floating off supernaturally into space before the screen settles finally into an abstract play of primary color). Earlier in the same film there is a mesmerizing shot of the sun filmed directly using filters, something which Antonioni boasted had never been done before (it is worth noting anecdotally that Antonioni once discussed with President Kennedy plans for the first NASA film about space).

FROM THE EVENT TO THE UNREPRESENTABLE

On account of their potent "there-ness"—a kind of "hyper-Real" contaminated by doubt and instability—all Antonioni's fiction films might justifiably be called "pseudo-documentaries" of place and time. They invariably engage with a precise historical actuality, whether post-war Italian society and culture, Swinging Sixties London, or the American counterculture of the late 1960s. Indeed, Antonioni's complex choreographics of style is designed expressly to convey the variable rhythms of modern life. For while he eschewed all claims to scientific truth and regarded his practice in typically humble terms as that of a "digger" searching and probing, his method was purposefully rigorous and quasi-scientific, not only in its relentless testing of the limits and capabilities of the medium but also in its continued investigation of the relations between human feeling, behavior, and space. Indeed, whether he is encrusting his core narrative shell with melodramatic elements or stripping it away still further in the interests of minimalism, the end result is the same: an exploration of the processes of human perception and modern subjectivity. In a short text from 1963 entitled "The Event and the Image," Antonioni talked eloquently of the need to capture a reality that is never static but "always moving toward or away from a moment of crystallization."[5] Alert to the tensions in the spatiotemporal relations between people, objects, and events, the director must, according to Antonioni, engage with a "special reality" and be "committed morally in some way." What this means in practice is dedramatizing the narrative event in order to focus attention on the physical context that both makes it possible but also eludes it. Antonioni propels his protagonists into new or alien environments, and we follow them almost ethnographically as they develop new perceptual powers in order to negotiate their changed conditions: Lidia's (Jeanne Moreau) walk in *La notte* through the rapidly changing streets of Milan and its periphery, Giuliana's (Monica Vitti) fearful encounter with the industrial landscape of the new Ravenna in *Red Desert*, Locke's (Jack Nicholson) journey from the Chadian desert to Andalusia via Munich, London, and Barcelona under his newly borrowed identity of international gunrunner.

All Antonioni's works may thus be regarded as essays on the relation between reality and its perception. This might suggest a purely academic exercise, yet the experience of watching Antonioni is intense and all-consuming. Haunted by the forces and after-effects of the Real, each original framing and spatial disposition of figures, each exquisitely textured composition, constitutes a physical provocation. In *L'avventura*, for example, the characters on the island are confronted with the immensities of the immanent world (what Deleuze called in Antonioni the "*any-space-whatever*") against which they appear powerless and absurd.[6] The "inexpressive" moments of *temps mort*, Antonioni's preferred strategy of shooting after the scene has finished in order to capture actors at their most natural, create of themselves a certain violence by fissuring the diegesis and severing narrative control. Antonioni continually makes us a witness to the processes of transformation, whether from a solid object to its disappearance (the sudden arrival of blanket mist, a sudden straight-cut edit, a slip into out-of-focus), or from figuration to apparent abstraction and its reverse (the frequent instances of anamorphosis in *Red Desert*, for example, where what appears at first sight to be an abstract painting in green reveals itself with a slight change of focal length to be a peeling wall). This move

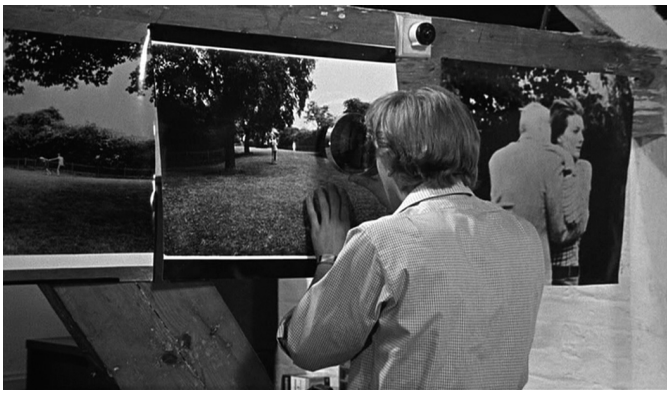
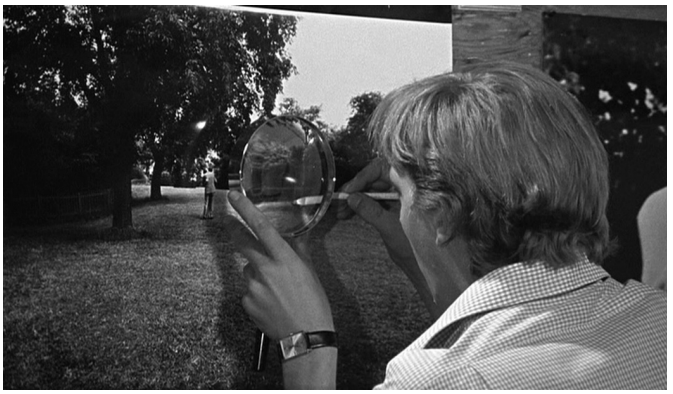
toward the amorphous and unrepresentable in Antonioni is formalized perfectly in the searing seven-minute, fifty-eight-shot closing montage of *L'eclisse*, the title of which already evokes both a natural sublime and the unthinkable catastrophe of technology. In the absence of the two protagonists who fail to show up at the intersection in the E.U.R., the viewer is presented with an assortment of shots that destroys any hierarchy between people and objects: a woman waiting for a bus, trees shaking in the breeze, a nurse pushing a pram, water running from a punctured rain barrel, a man turning off a sprinkler, a scaffolded building framed from different angles. There is no dialogue, only snatches of diegetic sound and fragments of Fusco's discordant, atonal music. The final image of the illumination of a street lamp in close-up—an apocalyptic explosion of pure colour, incandescent white in a darkening frame as night falls—might be said to figure a nuclear explosion "eclipsing" time. Such extreme emphasis on violent temporality and spatial materiality casts further violence upon the metaphysical superstructures of modernity. As Antonioni put it in 1961, quoting Lucretius: "Nothing appears as it should in a world where nothing is certain. The only thing certain is the existence of a secret violence that makes everything uncertain."

THE PLEASURE OF OBJECTS

Central to Antonioni's visionary project of freeing objects from the demands of human time and narrative is, of course, his obsessive work on decentering and dispersing the gaze. With their unorthodox use of field and counter-field and their deceptive point-of-view shots, his films destabilize the very act of looking. By revealing that an apparently subjective shot is yet another objective shot, Antonioni consistently exposes our anthropocentric pretensions. *Blowup* demonstrates brilliantly the vulnerability of the photographic image to the infinity of interpretations to which it may be subjected, and the fact that the image can no longer function as guarantor of the referent. Indeed, one of the film's constitutive ironies is the tension between its protagonist Thomas (David Hemmings), who thinks he can manipulate reality with the camera both in his commercial fashion photography and his alternative images of the homeless, and his creator Antonioni who shares no such confidence since he knows, as he put it in a 1964 interview, that the displayed image covers up an infinity of others such that its absolute truth can never be penetrated. To magnify images in detail is always to distort them, and Thomas signally fails to interpret the chain of events which he had nevertheless photographed accurately.

Emphasizing the artificiality of Antonioni's constructions, Dudley Andrew has argued that every motivation in his work becomes essentially object-oriented. In fact, the evolution of Antonioni's 1960s works can be accounted for in terms of the movement from objects serving as a mirror for psychic states (*La notte*), to objects that grow to organic proportions (*L'eclisse*), to objects poisoning the last resister (*Red Desert*), to finally objects which control the drama (*Blowup*).[7] In the case of the latter, it is the presence of the camera itself that now generates eroticism (or rather its obscene simulacrum) in the form of simulated sex between photographer and model. Yet always underpinning Antonioni's materialist poetics is, I believe, a wish to discover a genuine eroticism of the object and new sensory forms, his answer to the increasingly oversexualized and vulgarized culture of advanced western societies. His decision to adapt Cocteau's *The Eagle with Two Heads* for his first experiment in laser video-transfer processes, *The Mystery of Oberwald* (1980), seems for this reason entirely natural. For if Antonioni judged Cocteau a rather "slight" purveyor of melodrama, he also knew that Cocteau's cinema was one of the senses, at once erotic and poetic, especially in its compulsive framing of objects between men and the almost total rejection of subjective point-of-view shots as a way of extending the perception of ourselves as objects. Like Antonioni, Cocteau conceived of cinema as a research laboratory ready to disclose the mysteries of reality and generate new thoughts and sensations. The visceral, artificially created colors of *The Mystery of Oberwald*, which the studied theatricality of Vitti's performance as the widowed Queen throws into even greater relief, match Cocteau's own metaphysical aims.

Antonioni's many celebrated techniques to resensitize us to the world—the protracted long take, the use of mismatches and ellipsis, short focal lengths produced with a telephoto lens, split-screen and *tableau vivant* effects, in short, the flat, abstract style so well described by Seymour Chatman[8]—have as their ultimate goal to provide a form of reprieve from the increasing noise and chaos of modernity. The continual swerve towards a transfigured Real opens up for the viewer a personal, oppositional space of hushed contemplation of the world, like the boundless pleasure Vittoria takes in flying in a light plane above Italy in *L'eclisse*, or our smooth, continuous ride down the Pirelli tower at the start of *La notte* which offers a teasing play of reflections of Milan in the blocks of steel and glass. The *tour de force* seven-minute continuous tracking shot that brings *The Passenger* to a close, when the camera tracks agonizingly slowly forward through the iron bars of the hotel room while Locke/Robinson goes to sleep and waits for the narrative to seal his fate (the camera will eventually loop round to rejoin the hotel room and acknowledge his murder), allows us to reenter the greater drama of the heat and

Blowup. © 1966 Turner Entertainment Co. DVD: Warner Home Video (U.K.).

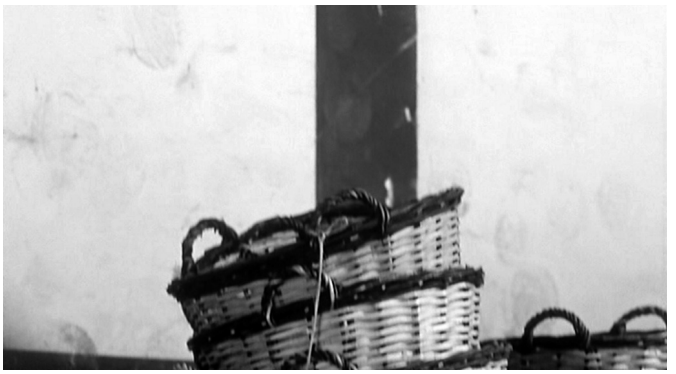
elements outside. The result of such moments is that we experience directly the intangibility and evanescence of all signs and identities, not only of the heteronormative presuppositions of Antonioni's characters but also of objects stripped of their symbolic meaning ("At times a piece of cloth, a needle, thread, or a book or a man is the same thing," Vittoria remarks in *L'eclisse*). Antonioni is inviting us to see "things" first as *artistic* forms and only later as having a functional human purpose. The most spectacular example of this process is the finale of *Zabriskie Point* where the series of explosions of Allen's hillside mansion villa fantasized by Daria is followed immediately by the breathtaking fallout sequence in slow motion to the sounds of Pink Floyd. The economic products of consumer society are now projected and suspended in Panavision as purely aesthetic objects against an ice-blue sky (special cameras were used here producing 3000 images per second).

A NEW TECHNO-AESTHETIC?

If *Red Desert* represents Antonioni's most comprehensive exploration of the complexities of perception, it is because it exploits virtually every resource available. In this, his first film to shoot scenes with more than one camera, Antonioni increases instances of displaced-witness point-of-view, figures isolated in the frame against a flat and blurred background, and random camera movements. In the astonishing setpiece orgy scene in the red cabin, for example, editing is also used to fragment and abstract space still further with cuts that feature the continuous time of uninterrupted dialogue but discontinuous space. The main drama, however, lies in the contrasting play of color: the bright red factory buildings and yellow smoke, the harsh white and blue hi-tech interior of the apartment, and Giuliana's shop in cooler blues and greens. Antonioni makes us fully aware here that our perception of the chromatic relations between characters and costumes is subject to variations at the level of framing and composition. It is no coincidence that the most insightful interview he gave about *Red Desert* was to Jean-Luc Godard, who was pursuing then his own sociological inquiry into the consumer society of the Fifth Republic. Antonioni agrees with Godard that the psychological *is* the plastic and that he approaches his characters by starting from things, objects and matter. This "ongoing piece of research," as he put it, informed by both painting and what he terms "a scientific methodology," is realism in a different way, for it uses the camera lens to limit the depth of field and taps into the psychophysiology of color.[9] The dynamic play of color filters, under- and overexposure, as well as out-of-focus shots that emphasize grain and mix up color, all serve to externalize the neurosis of Giuliana. After making love to Corrado (Richard Harris), for instance, the entire hotel room is bathed for Giuliana in a pink uterine hue (what Pasolini famously called Antonioni's *free indirect subjective*). Yet such arresting instances of out-of-focus cannot always be ascribed to Giuliana's tortured state. In the scene when Corrado tries to explain to the workers the attractions of Patagonia, we pass mysteriously in and out of focus across the faces in the crowd before succumbing to a purely formal play of shapes and lines. By disrupting any clear interpretation of the visible, Antonioni is testing the viewer's own perceptual powers. Moreover, by consciously smudging his own compositions and framings, he is effectively emulating the technological perfection of the new Italy, only then to take the personal—and, I would argue, inherently political—liberty of subverting his artistry. One thinks also of those moments in *La notte* when Lidia suddenly turns a corner and "disrupts" the clean lines and planes of the tall modern buildings shot from a high angle, or when, at the start of the same film, a bulldozer erupts from the right into the otherwise perfect framing of the couple's car moving at high speed towards us.

Much has been made of the irony that *Red Desert* is set in Ravenna, site of some of the world's most beautiful Byzantine mosaics. Della Vacche has shown, too, how Antonioni moves from a cinema of architecture (encoded in the film as masculine) to one of painting (feminine), or, to put it slightly differently, from a residual form of neo-realist documentation to a kind of pictorial abstraction, one that goes hand-in-hand in the film with a baroque tendency due to its vertiginous, and at times ecstatic, surplus of images.[10] Certainly, *Red Desert* can be interpreted aesthetically as a cinematic corollary of the general shift in the visual arts towards the non-figurative. Indeed, its sparse interiors allude in their stripes and blocks of color to Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Rothko. Matthew Gandy is surely right to suggest that with his equally self-conscious use of electronic music (Fusco, Vittorio Gelmetti) as a cinematic moodscape, Antonioni is presenting us here with a modern *Gesamtwerk*.[11] Yet *Red Desert* constitutes above all a genuine encounter between art and technology that dissolves the standard boundaries between them. In fact, it harks back to an earlier period of filmic experimentation in visualized rhythm and space–time abstraction, namely the avant-garde of the 1920s (Léger, Clair, Man Ray, Richter, Ruttman), where the distinction between art cinema and science film simply did not apply. It worked both ways, of course. One thinks, for example, of the underwater documentaries of the marine biologist Jean Painlevé who created a kind of abstract "magic realism" where the scientific is also the poetic. By inventing a new cinematic language perfectly calibrated to his artistic and philosophical ideas, Antonioni

RED DESERT: THE MOVING IMAGE AS *TABLEAU VIVANT*



Il deserto rosso. © 1964 Tvor/Mediaset. DVD: Carlotta (France).

was (notwithstanding his remark in the Bachmann interview) effectively restoring cinema's scientific purpose and its potential as a new model of thought. Indeed, what makes the story of Antonioni's development as a filmmaker so enthralling is that his practice was continually evolving and renewing itself technically. After *Red Desert* he went straight on to *Blowup* which not only interrogated the processes of still photography and visual narrativization (for example, the direct reference to Lumière in the opening realist images of men leaving the dosshouse, the reconstitution of images of "the event" by graphic sequencing), but also extended his manipulation of sound with a "subjective" soundtrack of natural noises. Antonioni's openness to change and new media meant that he was always ready to surprise interviewers with his optimism about the future of "techno-cinema" and even contemplate the end of conventional film.

If late Antonioni fails ultimately to deliver on the artistic and scientific promise of *Red Desert* and *Blowup*, it is precisely because the exactitude of his method was such that it required him to be at the very peak of his mental and physical powers. *Identification of a Woman* appears to turn inside-out some of the key features of Antonioni's style. Gone are his trademark pans and long tracking shots, replaced by dissolves and even subjective point-of-view shots. The editing is unusually tight and clipped, producing a fast, efficient pace that makes impossible the type of prolonged contact with objects I have been describing. Antonioni explained that this style was designed to convey the blandness of the period he was now working in and the slick lifestyles of his protagonists. Yet because almost everything that occurs is either seen or heard by Niccolò, who is utterly lacking in charisma, the ironic and critical space between filmmaker/narrator and filmmaker/protagonist is significantly reduced. With the need to chart a transformation of the environment seemingly now passed, the film fails to impose its own distinctive pace and rhythm. *Beyond the Clouds* (1995) was an uneven portmanteau film in four discrete parts which Wim Wenders helped Antonioni to complete after a stroke in 1985 left him virtually speechless and paralyzed on his right side. Although offering renewed proof of Antonioni's unique vision (majestic images of autumnal Ferrara, a sequence of wind churning up sand into a translucent storm as sky and sea appear to close in, a dazzling long shot on a twisting road which only Antonioni believed possible), the film as a whole, loosely connected by the figure of the wandering scriptwriter (John Malkovich), feels like Antonioni-by-numbers and more a tone poem. The same is true of *The Dangerous Thread of Things* (2004), a rather predictable and labored contribution to the compilation film *Eros*. The self-consciously banal sex scene accompanied by softcore electronic synthesizers embodies the very malaise which Antonioni was interrogating in his earlier work.

Such minor coda works do not detract, however, from Antonioni's staggering achievement in redefining our concrete understanding of reality and perception. His uncompromising gaze and method have transformed cinema by taking it into entirely new spaces of thought and being. The passing of this most consummate auteur just a day after that of Ingmar Bergman would herald for some the end of European modernism and innovation. But in their unflinching and all-embracing engagement with the mysterious, violent forces of the Real, Antonioni's works still inspire. As China once again demands our full attention and forces us to reconsider the relations between truth, perception, and representation, we need filmmakers of Antonioni's experimentalist ambition, foresight and commitment to help us rise to the challenge.

1. The sense of Antonioni's "invisibility" is compounded by the number of abortive projects: between 1945 and 1950, for example, he wrote nineteen scripts for documentaries that were never made, while potentially his most ambitious feature film, *Technically Sweet*, was never realized despite extensive location work in the early 1970s. Published collections by Antonioni such as *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber* (1987), comprising thirty-three scripts and ideas, and *Unfinished Business* (1998), reveal how many other projects he also had in mind.
2. Gideon Bachmann, "Antonioni after China: Art Versus Science," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (summer 1975): 26–30.
3. Ibid, 28.
4. See "Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*: Painting as Ventriloquism and Color as Movement," in Angela Dalle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film* (London: Athlone, 1996), pp. 50–51.
5. See Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. Marga Cottino-Jones (1996; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 51–52.
6. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (1983; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 122.
7. J. Dudley Andrew, "The Stature of Objects in Antonioni's Films," *Tri-Quarterly* 11 (1968): 54.
8. See Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, or, the Surface of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
9. See "The Night, The Eclipse, The Dawn," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 160 (1964), in Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision*, pp. 294–95.
10. See Dalle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting*, pp. 62–66.
11. Matthew Gandy, "Landscapes of deliquescence in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28, no. 2 (2003): 227.

JAMES S. WILLIAMS is Professor of Modern French Literature and Film at Royal Holloway, University of London.

ABSTRACT This essay assesses Antonioni's *oeuvre* in its totality, focusing in particular on its constant negotiation of two extremes: documentary and melodrama. The essay argues that Antonioni's is a visionary project which, by achieving a genuine encounter between art and technology, extends an earlier tradition of the European avant-garde.

KEYWORDS Antonioni, neo-realism, documentary, melodrama, technology

DA CAPO

FILM QUARTERLY'S FOUNDING EDITOR, **ERNEST CALLENBACH**, REFLECTS ON ITS HISTORY

Looking back over fifty years of anything is bound to be sobering—especially through the fog of an erratic memory like mine. But as a tangible reminder, there on the shelves is the full set of *Film Quarterly* issues, now measuring more than five feet overall. It starts with the original small, squarish format and ends with the present full-magazine-size one, with its gloriously flat-backed binding, even a color cover. Each issue is a book's worth of hard thinking about our beloved art; the entire collection reflects the handiwork of a legion of wonderful writers so numerous that I cannot possibly mention them all.

In the beginning, the world of film thought was without form, though not quite void. As happens in human affairs, a tiny band of crazed people undertook a possibly hopeless task: to create and maintain an American forum for intelligent discussion of a then largely despised art. It was an accident of academic history that created the opening, and an accident of cultural history that enabled us to exploit it. The magazine played a part in the evolution of a level and volume of serious thinking about film which seemed inconceivable at the outset.

Please indulge me in a succinct summary of the situation in early 1958. In London, the august journal *Sight and Sound*, already decades old, seemed to have a monopoly on top-level English-language writing about film. In New York, *Film Culture* fiercely devoted itself to independent, avant-garde cinema. In Paris *Cahiers du cinéma*, inspired by André Bazin and a legion of ciné-club people, brought a unique kind of polemical intellectual energy to film, nagged on the left by the lively *Positif*. In the U.S., we had *Films in Review*, a tiny magazine featuring lengthy filmmaker career summaries and many brief reviews. (It had printed my earliest article, on comedy, written when I was still an undergraduate in the Documentary Film Group at the University of Chicago, a country kid newly smitten with cinema.) On American campuses, although student film societies were becoming common, the extant departments at UCLA, USC, NYU, and Iowa focused almost exclusively on production courses, with only passing glances at film history or criticism. Newspaper reviewers, with the solitary exception of Bosley Crowther at the *New York Times*, tended to be failed crime or sports reporters, or relatives of publishers, and magazine reviewing was mostly either supercilious or superficial.

The nearest thing to American film scholars at that time were people such as Lewis Jacobs, who was especially good on documentary, my first love; Jay Leyda, an authority on Soviet films; Arthur Knight, who wrote a solid and serviceable popular history of film and also wrote for the general-interest magazine *Saturday Review*; and Parker Tyler, who approached film, mostly avant-garde film, from a Freudian perspective. We were aware of Paul Rotha through his huge and hugely useful British-published history of film. In Europe, Rudolf Arnheim had written *Film as Art* in 1933, and later Raymond Spottiswoode in England contributed his pioneering *Grammar of the Film*. Less than a dozen serious books altogether! Nowadays *Film Quarterly*, in its dedication to reviewing English-language film books, however specialized, may cover fifty or sixty in one year.

But we did have, obscurely, a journal: the *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television*, published by the University of California Press and descended from the earlier *Hollywood Quarterly*. That journal had been born from an unlikely union of the Press with the post-war Hollywood Writers Mobilization—a group of smart Hollywood reds who thought the post-war American film deserved intelligent discussion. (The connection ultimately got the Press listed on the California legislature's subversive list.) As the blacklist took its toll in Hollywood, *Hollywood Quarterly*'s writers mostly went underground and left the journal to evolve in a sociological direction, focusing on mass media studies under the new title. However, social scientists had other publication venues, and the *Quarterly Review* gradually declined to a circulation of a few hundred, mostly libraries. Its managing editor resigned.

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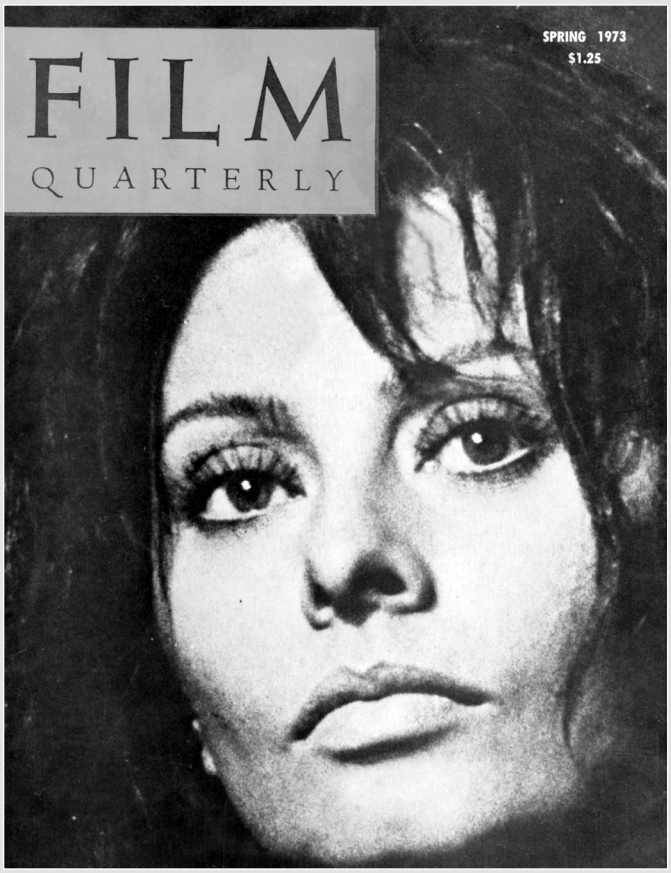
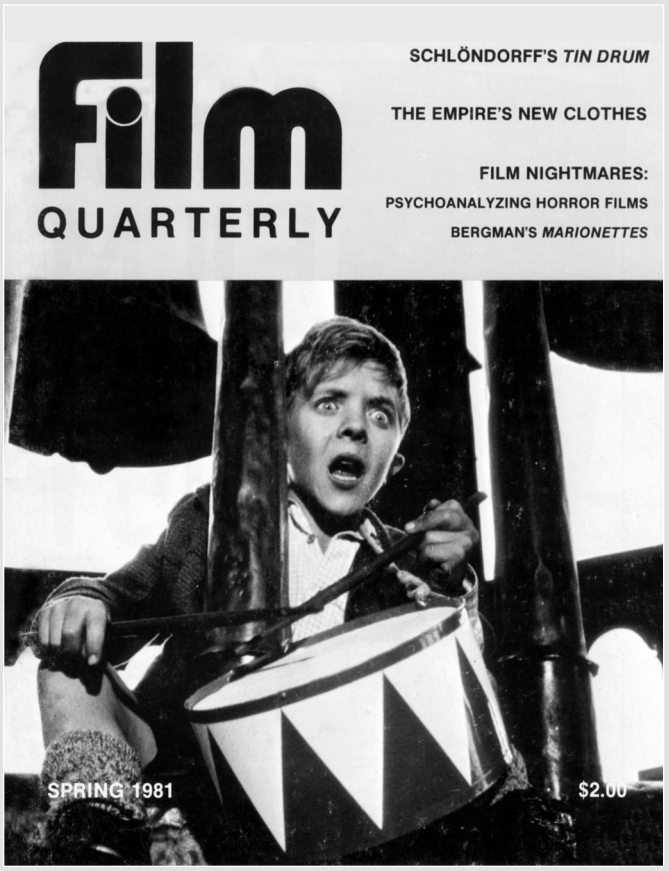
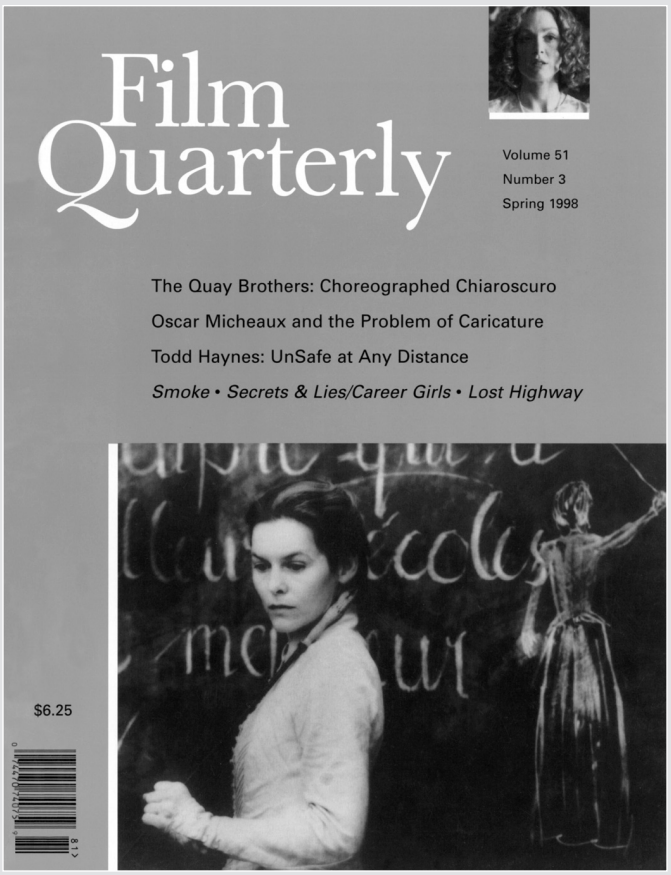
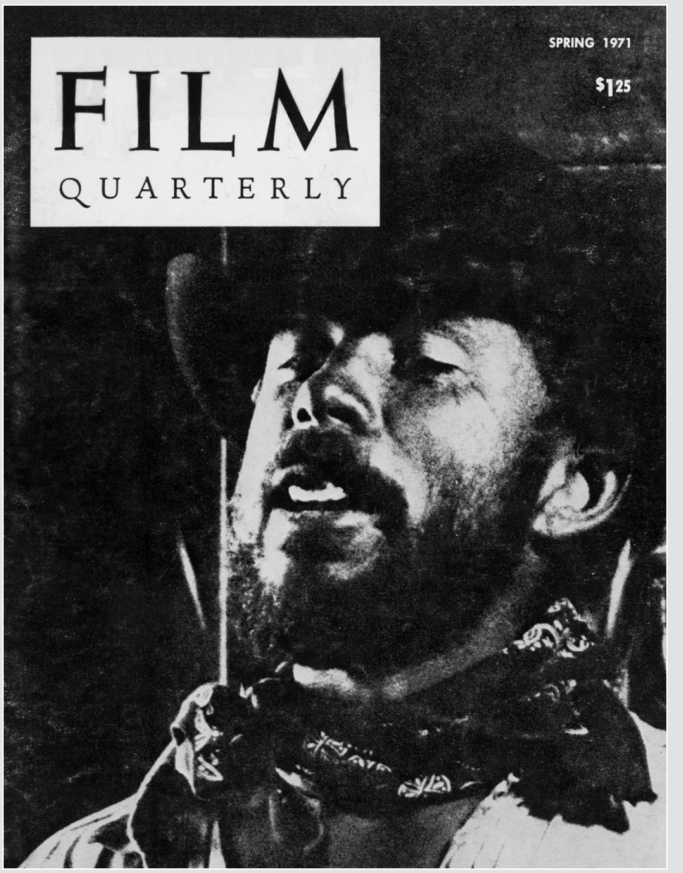
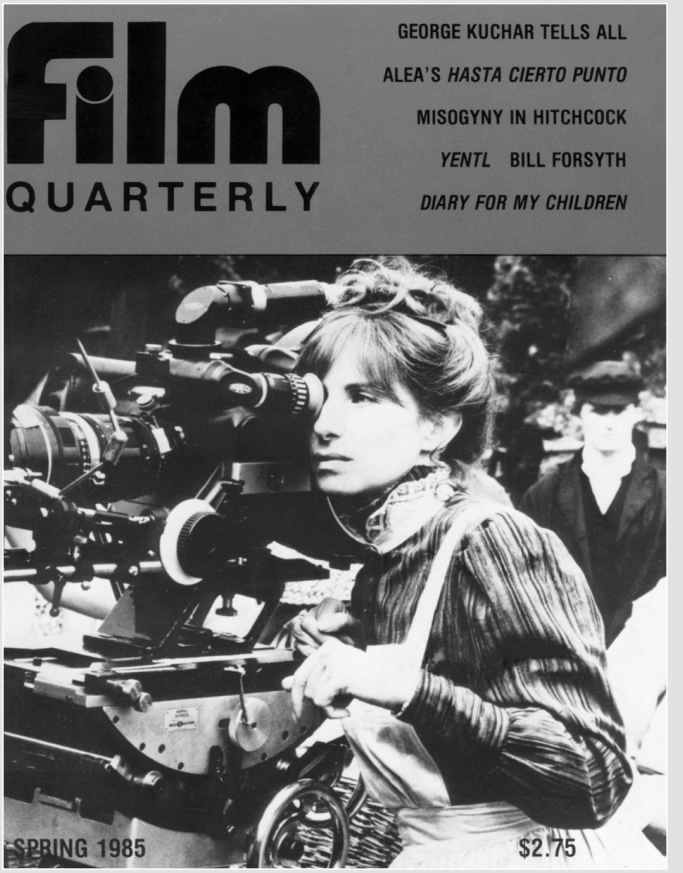






Cover images clockwise from top left: *Man of La Mancha* (Arthur Hiller, 1972). *The Tin Drum* (Volker Schlöndorff). *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (Isaac Julien, 1996), *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill* (Judy Irving, 2003). *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), *Institute Benjamenta* (Brothers Quay, 1995).





Cover images clockwise from top left: *Quick Billy* (Bruce Baillie, 1971). *W.R. – Mysteries of the Organism* (Dušan Makavejev, 1971). *The Mirror* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989). *Yentil* (Barbra Streisand, 1983).

At this point August Frugé, the director of the University of California Press, decided to let it die. However, the journal had some money attached to it in the Press budget, and the ever-thrifty Frugé was reluctant to see this disappear. Luckily, he had a friend, the Dutch filmmaker Andries Deinum, who had been teaching film at USC until unwise attendance at a student Marxist study group got him fired. Deinum, though an eloquent partisan of documentary, was neither a native English speaker nor a writer, and he declined Frugé's offer to start up the journal anew. But he pointed out to Frugé that there happened to be on the Press staff, employed in writing jacket blurbs and catalog copy, a fellow named Callenbach who had published several pieces in the *Quarterly Review*.

Frugé asked me whether I thought the journal could be revived. I replied that while there seemed no point in doing that, maybe one could envision an alternative: a film counterpart of American literary "little magazines," but taking from *Sight and Sound* the model of a magazine with stills, reviews, and interviews, along with articles—and aiming at a substantial circulation. Frugé was at home in the art and literary worlds, often went to films, and liked the idea. But, I said, there's a better person here in Berkeley to do it: Pauline Kael. At that time, Pauline had a popular radio program on listener-sponsored KPFA and had written several impressive articles. Like many others, I much enjoyed hanging around at the informal film salons she hosted. But when she came to see Frugé, she made it plain that she insisted on total editorial control, and Frugé made it plain that in university publishing, using public money and working within a complex bureaucratic structure, there was no such thing. After Pauline marched out of his office, he asked me to prepare a plan for a trial year of publishing what became *Film Quarterly*. He proposed that we do a journal that was "intellectual but not academic." A bit daunted, I accepted the challenge.

Of course, despite years of immersing myself in film at Chicago, and spending six months at the Sorbonne's Institut de Filmologie listening to lectures by Georges Sadoul (and attending innumerable film society showings, some of them presided over by André Bazin), I had no idea what I was doing. But I sought and was given much good advice. Gavin Lambert, who had edited *Sight and Sound* for a time, was now a scriptwriter and novelist in Los Angeles and agreed to join our editorial board, as did Andries Deinum, the instigator of the whole enterprise. Albert Johnson, who lived in Berkeley, was an expert on Hollywood production, particularly musicals and black cinema, and he agreed to serve as assistant editor. At UCLA, I found Colin Young, then a lowly assistant professor interested in Japanese films and in documentary. He proved a fountain of organizational and critical energy, and served both on the board and as our Los Angeles Editor. We also persuaded Hugh Gray, from the UCLA film department, to join us; he was one of the few people then teaching film history, but he had also worked in the industry.

Since I was a new and potentially loose cannon, Frugé had installed the editorial board partly to keep an eye on me. But from our initial cognac-fueled board meeting was born the collegial editorial process that was used by the journal for many years. To secure relations with the faculty Editorial Committee that controlled the Press imprint, Frugé got one of its members, Paul Jorgensen of the UCLA English Department, to join us; he soon contributed a pioneering article on the TV series *Divorce Court*, initiating our attempts to reach out beyond a narrow definition of "film." For many decades, nobody ever resigned from the *Film Quarterly* board, despite a heavy workload of reading and reviewing manuscripts; our unpaid meetings evidently offered an irresistible opportunity for informed and sometimes heated discussion.

Our goal in 1958 was to collect a team of knowledgeable and ardent people who could energize an American film magazine on a reasonably high intellectual level. We wanted to cover narrative features and also documentaries and experimental films, new trends in style and structure and content; we wanted to keep in touch with film history. In our debut issue Christopher Bishop tried for a definitive treatment of the greatest film comic of them all, Buster Keaton—an interview and an article. As we scoured the world for good writers who might give us something, rather than going to *Sight and Sound*, we found Donald Richie in Tokyo, Vernon Young, Eugene Archer, and others. We covered some experimental films, and even lured James Broughton into writing a review. We paid continued attention to Ingmar Bergman's career. We sought substantial film criticism and what was not yet called theory: we printed some André Bazin. We took the measure of innovative sci-fi films, as we did over the decades. We revisited classics, reevaluating *Children of Paradise* (1945) and *The Gold Rush* (1925). We analyzed the early work of Alain Resnais. We ran long articles on Luchino Visconti, on Ozu, on Fellini and Antonioni, on the new Paris directors (Truffaut, Chabrol, Rivette, Varda, Godard). We were, in short, auteurists in our fashion, but we nonetheless welcomed the proposal by Pauline Kael, then still living in Berkeley, to do an article attacking "auteurism"—the *Cahiers* auteur policy imported to the U.S. as auteur theory by Andrew Sarris. We had "Films of the Quarter," brief notes on current works contributed by Kael, Sarris, Dwight Macdonald, Stanley Kauffman, Jonas Mekas, and Gavin Lambert. We almost always had an in-depth interview with a director, and a number of substantial film reviews.

In our first decade it became normal for educated people to take film directors as seriously as they took novelists. Film won acceptance as a kind of visual literature, part of a vibrant political-cultural life, something urgently talked and argued about, and *Film Quarterly* plunged into this pool of energy. We managed to mobilize a sizable and far-flung group of early contributors, including journalists and some film-crazed academics, usually from literature departments and often with experience of foreign cinema. It was an enormous privilege to work with a brilliant band of writers that included, among many, many others, William Johnson, Richard Corliss, Stephen Farber, Joseph McBride, Paul Warshow, Nick Browne, Michael Dempsey, Joan Mellen, Jackson Burgess, Gideon Bachmann, Marsha Kinder, Leo Braudy, Alan Williams, Bruce Kawin, Paul Schrader. Sometimes the recruitment process happened by mail and phone, or by wonderfully random referrals. Sometimes it was very personal, as when then undergraduate Linda Williams picked through my library of film books while she baby-sat my son, and got hooked.

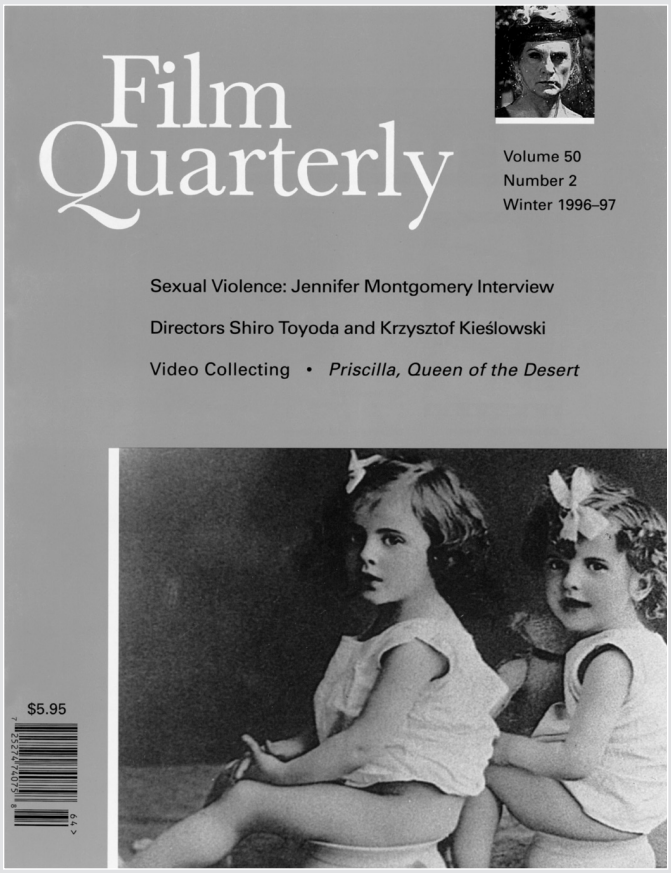
Over the years, as film study steadily infiltrated the academy, more bright and perceptive writers turned up in colleges and universities, and the level of thinking in the magazine correspondingly became more sophisticated and at the same time frequently more esoteric—a problem with which all three *Film Quarterly* editors have wrestled, since narrowness of focus leads to declining readership. The mission of the journal since its beginning has always been to create a broad universe of discourse accessible to people who take film seriously, but who may not themselves be scholars. One component of this enterprise is to remain surprising, so over the years we have swum against various tides. We interviewed Clint Eastwood long before anybody else took him seriously as a director, and Dušan Makavejev when his *W.R. – Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) was a new scandal. We printed a confessional piece about porn-watching in the days before porn became a suburban-wives market. We liked to publish writers who defended films that almost nobody liked. We even produced an impressive critical round table on *Showgirls* (1995) perhaps proving that no film is beneath discussion.

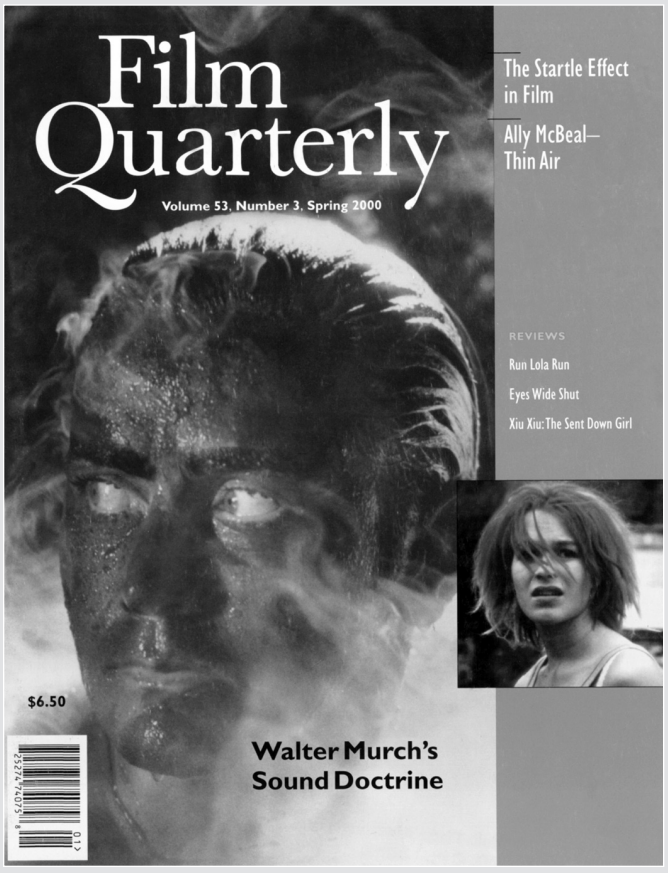
As it became apparent that the journal had established an editorial presence, found an audience, and showed a miniscule surplus in its budget, the Press agreed that we would continue indefinitely. Trying to cope with the entire intellectual evolution in which the journal participated would be tedious, so here I will only touch briefly on several of our eight or ten continuing emphases and concerns.

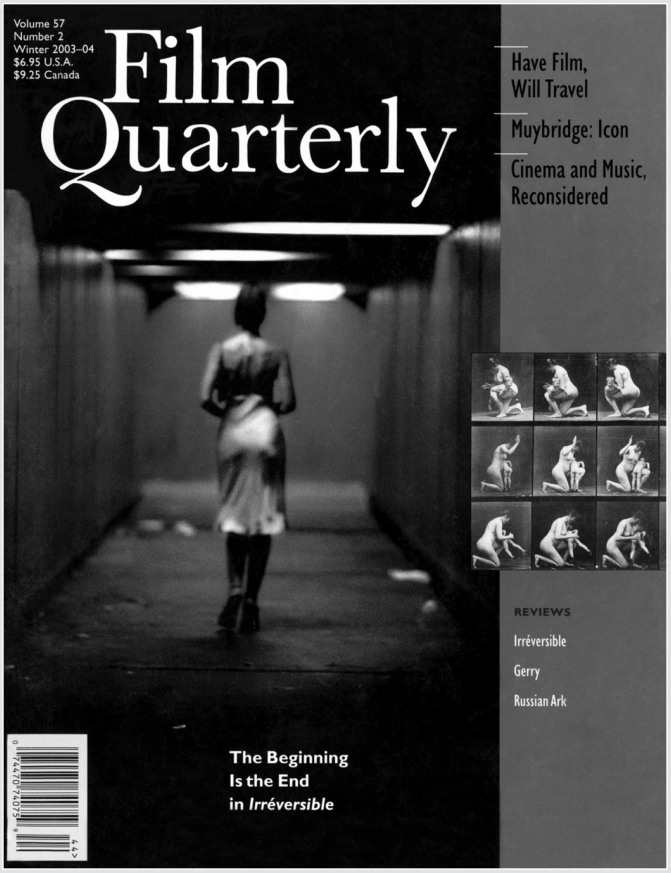
Now that documentary has rebounded into perhaps the most dynamic of current cinematic forms, it's particularly satisfying that early on we not only published an ambitious special feature on Humphrey Jennings, but were lucky to be involved in the exciting epoch when new light cameras and compact sound equipment opened up possibilities for "direct cinema," also termed *cinéma-vérité*. These films had stories of a sort, and some of them were feature-length, but they were heavily informed by anthropology, not only in the ethnographic work of Jean Rouch, but also, for instance, in the Leacock–Maysles–Pennebaker documentation of the American primary election ritual. They opened up new subject matter for film, they posed novel structural problems, and they seemed to fulfill some of the promises of long-ago documentary enthusiasts that film could enable us to see our society in new and useful ways. (They also posed issues of point of view, authorial presence, and transparency which were adumbrated in our pages by Bill Nichols, David MacDougall and others, and which have remained relevant ever since.) The style, so shocking at the outset, gradually became the standard for news reportage; it also provided the platform for Frederick Wiseman's magisterial survey of American institutions. Now, when tiny and versatile digital equipment is ubiquitous, it's hard to remember how exhilarating it was for filmmakers to escape the tyranny of ponderous studio cameras and sound-recording equipment. But the wealth of innovative and penetrating documentary that we are now enjoying was pioneered by the direct-cinema people.

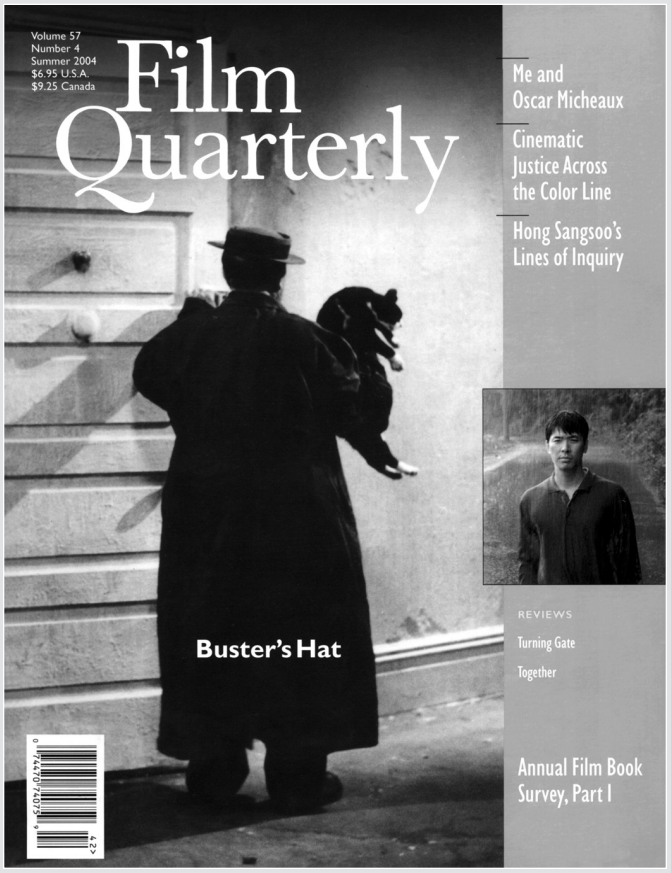
From the beginning, we wanted the magazine to be lively and miscellaneous. We looked for interesting work from the ends of the earth, but we also maintained a strong interest in American film of all kinds, and we were lucky to find knowledgeable writers who repeatedly contributed pieces on new films and thematic or structural trends they manifested. Scott MacDonald gave us a long (and ongoing) series of canny interviews with often quirky experimental artists—many of which, like Andrew Horton's thoughts on screenwriting that first appeared in *Film Quarterly*, ended up in books published by the University of California Press or other leading presses. In some sense, *Film Quarterly* was a school for writers. In those more leisurely times, I was able to write many three-page, single-spaced letters back to would-be contributors, aiming to turn their drafts into publishable articles—and deeply offending a few who later became dear colleagues, as well as some who found more sympathetic editors elsewhere. From my perspective, it was an intimate and profoundly enjoyable process; my dry University of Chicago training in taking apart and assessing argumentative structures proved unexpectedly useful. It was work that I loved, and to this day I am touched when people tell me they benefited from it.

From the beginning, *Film Quarterly* hosted writing from different critical perspectives; we described ourselves as an









Cover images clockwise from top left: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994), *Age 12: Love with a Little L* (Jennifer Montgomery, 1990). *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998). *Film* (Alan Schneider, 1965), *Turning Gate* (Hong Sangsoo, 2002). *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002).

arena journal, not a journal like *Cahiers* with a programmatic editorial "line." This was of course appropriate to our public-university sponsorship, but it was also temperamentally agreeable to me; I have always liked to foster the blooming of many flowers, and do not blanch at being called a bourgeois liberal. We were eager to publish film thinking based on a wide variety of ideas, so long as they seemed both defensibly argued and readable by a more than an academic audience. We tried to keep somewhat current with new releases of importance, and we tried to reflect and refine the intense currents of thinking that swept the film world.

As the theatrical film industry struggled to stave off the inroads of television, CinemaScope arrived. A good deal of critical derision greeted the format, but we were happy to publish a thoughtfully iconoclastic piece by Charles Barr on the aesthetic implications of the wide screen. Following up on this opening, we continued to deal with the formal, stylistic consequences of technological developments: the transformation of films' audio space through ADR and Foley techniques; the undermining of image veracity through digital manipulation (and now creation). Later, these issues were attacked with critical acuity and technological savvy by writers such as Stephen Prince and Jean-Pierre Geuens.

Film Quarterly's position on the fringes of academia was not a bad place to be. After Nixon escalated the Vietnam War and the campuses exploded with protests, film radicalism and political radicalism became inextricable. It seems that new energy for cultural matters erupts from deep, tectonic pressures in the society, when masses of people have begun moving. New questions get asked, and sometimes answered. New possibilities become visible. At any rate, during this great period of intellectual excitement about film, from the 1960s into the 1980s, writers in *Film Quarterly* and elsewhere pursued two main new branches of film thinking. One was to look anew at the formal side of film, its organizing principles, as Brian Henderson did in his striking first piece for us, "Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style," which focused mainly on Godard. The philosophical basis of Bazin's thinking was closely reexamined, and later the ideas of the structuralists. The other trend was to try and link film innovations to the political turmoil around us. Godard's unsettling features drew the canny and devoted attention of Berkeley writer James Roy MacBean, who also wrote on Rossellini and radical Latin American filmmakers. In those years, other publications also addressed political issues in film, often from revolutionary perspectives: for example, *Cineaste* and *Jump Cut*. Specifically feminist issues began to be addressed in *Women in Film* and *Camera Obscura*. There was a hunger for new ideas, new critical tools, new theoretical ideas.

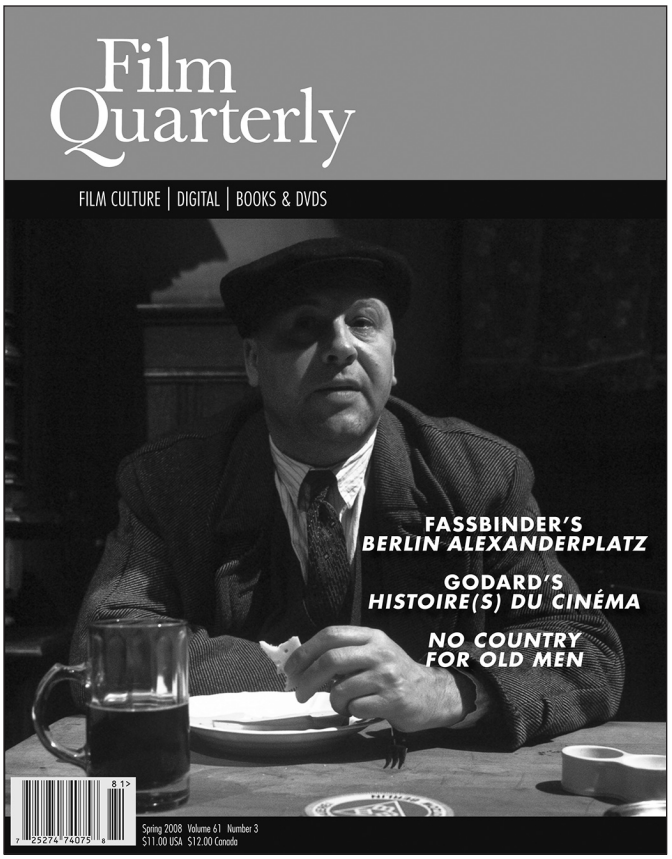
Theory of a scientific sort depends on quantification, so when a former physicist named Barry Salt sent in an article called "Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures," it seemed intriguing. Salt had doggedly compiled figures on average shot length, shot scope, and camera movement for hundreds of films. He could demonstrate clear historical trends in these figures, and relate them to interesting stylistic questions. We printed his piece, to the outrage of some humanities people (though statistical analysis had by that time become familiar in linguistic and comparative-literature work). In time, Salt's innovation became a familiar analytic method.

But we also faced the invasion of largely French semiotic and psychoanalytic "theory," which seemed to promise to transcend political-cultural struggles. As it happened, I had some background in science and was favorably disposed to the notion that one might conceivably devise testable general hypotheses about film. The ideas offered, however, were on another level, initially attempting to describe film as a kind of language or set of codes. This thinking so greatly excited its proponents that they sometimes neglected to apply it to real films, even going so far as to invent scenes or shots in which it *might* apply. Finally, as a kind of delayed-onset Freudianism was also brought to bear, I felt the need to draw a line about submissions having to deal with real films, not just theoretical formulations: in my "Editor's Notebook," I pleaded that theory and praxis needed to be treated together. In time, the theoretical pieces got more concrete; also, as years passed many writers began to appreciate the attractions of history and its theoretical implications.

We also had to come to terms in this period with structuralism and deconstruction, which usefully undermined simplistic auteurism and traditional stylistic analysis, but also tended to dissolve films into a kind of anonymous cultural-social-historical stew. We continued to print some auteurist pieces, but mostly turned away from the "national cinemas" approach. We also tried to offer space to writers with a phenomenological perspective: film as experience. And we tried to remain open to the thinking of experimental psychologists trying to study how viewers actually experience film images.

As I look back over the hopes, achievements, and shortcomings of this period, it seems to me that what can make film theory truly interesting and productive is its attempts to make systematic sense of how films are constructed, how they work on viewers, and how they relate to the surrounding society. There is no real border between criticism and theory. Luckily, many brilliant writers have learned to do the excruciatingly hard work of bringing general ideas productively into critical analyses.

I will venture a few words about the academic evolution of which *Film Quarterly* was a part. In the beginning, only a



handful of people with university posts wrote about film from a critical or historical perspective. So we cultivated younger minds. We turned up graduate students, often from language departments (including English) who cared about film—Stephen Farber, for instance, who went on from Berkeley to the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. David Denby, who ended up at *The New Yorker* after Pauline Kael's reign, was a graduate student at Stanford when he gave us several pieces. Gradually, more submissions to the magazine came from academics, at first junior or adjunct professors then people in established film departments, many of them wise and passionate writers. But as the field became more specialized and academy-based, boasting a scholarly society with its own learned journal, it inevitably also contained more careerists—people who wrote about film to get promotions and tenure rather than because they loved the art. *Film Quarterly*'s editors have struggled valiantly against the tendency toward more boring and academic pieces, but the historical paradox is that as the intellectual level of discourse in the field rose, its appeal to nonspecialist moviegoing readers declined. Without the electricity and energy of the 1960s and 1970s behind it, the journal moved, both under my guidance and Ann Martin's, and in step with the nationwide consolidation of Film Studies in universities, toward a more sober, scholarly, and limited-circulation form. This was, arguably, appropriate to the field's evolution. But we are now, I suspect, at a new juncture. There is a great proliferation of small and in their various ways specialized journals dealing with film, TV, and related media. We do not have a publication arena in which all this new thinking comes together and contends. But the new editor, Rob White, is determined to seize this opportunity by using the journal as a site for more short, sharp pieces that can appeal not only to a wide audience of moviegoers but to specialists of all kinds. A livelier, broader conversation is visibly in progress. Moreover, if we are on the verge of a new outpouring of social energy, as many suspect, this new *Film Quarterly* will have an exciting part to play in articulating new connections between film and the society it inhabits. From my *fondatore* viewpoint, it is enormously encouraging that so many smart and articulate and perceptive people are eager to write for the magazine, which, I am still told, is taken to be the most critically important of American film publications.

Journals are exceedingly fragile organisms, dependent upon the acuity, eloquence, and goodwill (not to forget ambition) of contributors, the faithfulness and generosity of subscribers, the commitment of publishers, and the stamina (and diplomacy) of editors. In 1958, had our hardy band of founders taken a moment to consider the likelihood that our little project would endure for half a century, we would have laughed, and had another drink. Yet here *Film Quarterly* is today, eager to make sense of the prolific globalization of cinema, the constant innovation of documentary, the perpetual reevaluation demanded by the past, the perplexing interfertilization of film and electronic technologies for both production and dissemination, and the evolving and metamorphosing of visual style. Film has ever been a commercial art, existing precariously in a tumultuous industry. Like the theater, it is perennially dying and being reborn. But if our society does indeed open up again to new ideas and new possibilities, filmmakers (including the people who work in electronic media) will be there to refract, transmit, and exemplify what's happening, and we will need good critics to analyze and critique their work. The uniqueness of the cinema is that it is at once relentlessly concrete and specificity-bound (despite being in some ways coded), and yet able to contain and manifest ideas. A great film holds reality and meaning in magical suspension. So we, entranced, enraptured, ensorcelled, will keep watching, thinking, and writing about that magic.

ERNEST CALLENBACH edited *Film Quarterly* from 1958 to 1991.

ABSTRACT A history of *Film Quarterly*, written by its founding editor to mark the publication's fiftieth anniversary, and covering in particular its early years, notable contributors, and editorial policy.

KEYWORDS *Film Quarterly*, film magazines, film criticism, American film, film journalism

CONFRONTATIONS: *BIÙTIFUL CAUNTRI* AND *TRACES OF THE TRADE*

WILLIAM JOHNSON REVIEWS TWO IMPASSIONED LOW-BUDGET DOCUMENTARIES

At first sight (and hearing) it seems that the two documentaries reviewed here could hardly be more different.

The Italian-made *Biùtiful Cauntri*, with its title of aptly distorted English, is a fiery protest against the illegal dumping of chemical and other lethal waste throughout the Naples area. (The impact is far worse than the lack of adequate garbage collection in Naples itself, which has received much more attention in the American press.)

The American-made *Traces of the Trade*, with its cooler title and tone, raises a more elusive and complex situation. A group of upper-middle-class Americans tries to come to terms with, and perhaps atone for, the discovery that one of their forebears, a resident of Rhode Island, accumulated immense family wealth as the biggest American slave trader.

Both films, in their different ways, are brilliantly made without recourse to easy display. Both involve considerable speech, often passionate and angry in *Biùtiful Cauntri* and tentative and questioning in *Traces of the Trade*. Both end with religious occasions, al fresco and massive in *Biùtiful Cauntri*, quiet and intense in *Traces of the Trade*. What they share in common is the confrontation of horror: the present horror of corruption and greed in *Biùtiful Cauntri*, the past but still lingering horror of black slavery in *Traces of the Trade*. And in so doing they both go beyond the standard sympathetic but detached approach and involve the viewer directly in the concerns of the participants.

⁂

Raffaele del Giudice rants incessantly as he drives to a waste disposal site in Acerra, a community about ten miles northeast of Naples. An environmental activist, he wants to take the film crew inside to record how well or badly official waste disposal is being handled. As they are refused entrance, he curses and continues cursing as he heads on foot down a nearby track and unearths two illegal dumps amid the thickets of trees and bushes on either side.

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Undeterred

Biùtiful Cauntri. Source: www.biutifulcauntri.it.

Del Giudice's protests and cursing recur frequently in *Biùtiful Cauntri*, most notably during an informal tour of an official landfill that he denounces as incompetent and most persistently as he continues throughout the film to discover illegal dumps amid trees just off back roads or next to a pristine looking lake. In many places the dumps have also been set on fire in an attempt to conceal their origin.

In the 1990s more and more industrial plants began moving into what had been rural areas. The problem, Del Giudice says, is that the industries, in cahoots with the Camorra (the local mafia), have bribed local politicians to look the other way while the problem of waste disposal is solved the cheap, easy and lethal way. The film's soundtrack includes tapped phone calls between two unidentified men cheerfully plotting more illegal dumping, one of whom mentions a person named Berlusconi (apparently a distant relative of the premier).

Del Giudice is the angry voice of those who are suffering most directly from the illegal dumping. The first of them appear immediately after the visit to the waste disposal dump as

a flock of sheep is herded past. A couple with two small children run a sheep farm, and a few years ago at least one new industry dumped large quantities of dioxin on the surrounding land. Now the husband picks up a newly dead lamb and puts it in a garbage bag. His sheep are dying, lambs first, and before the film ends all of the flock have become infected and are being trucked away to be slaughtered and their bodies burned. As they disappear the husband suddenly cries out "I'm devastated—they were like daughters to me!"

While anger and outrage play a large part in *Biùtiful Cauntri*, the film itself is far from an uncontrolled rant, and that restraint makes it even more powerful. One striking way in which it heightens the impact of its message is by underplaying the one filmic resource that could easily have been overdone: the music/sound score by Valerio Faggione and Guido Zen. (Esmeralda Calabria, co-director and editor of the film, told me that the two young composers are friends and that she discovered them when one came to paint her house.)

The film opens with a scene from a train as it enters Naples, but what we hear is an odd warbling-twittering sound instead of a confident roar, hinting at once that something is off kilter. There are sounds like distant gunfire before and after the death of two sheep, uneasy rustlings when a factory is discussed, a kind of groaning at a landfill, and so on. Many of the sounds are faint and repetitive, suggesting a condition both deeply rooted and impervious to change. Louder sounds accompany a few more dramatic situations, such as the slowly repeated chords that accompany a traveling shot past the innumerable containers of chemical waste at an abandoned factory, and above all the brief outbreaks of rattling, then whirring, and finally groaning that mark the departure of the condemned sheep. (In case my description of those sounds suggests they are overdone or intrusive, it was only on a second viewing of the film, when I made a point of listening, that I was aware of the full but measured impact of the soundtrack)

Even speech acquires a near-musical effect. The agitato of Del Giudice contrasts with the more deliberate and more mournful speech of the sheepherder and others affected by the illegal dumping. The coolest tone comes from a prosecutor, who in a series of scenes is shown reading out a list of specific dumping offenses in a carefully articulated voice. But the most chilling speech comes from the tapped phone conversations of two dumpers making plans: their voices are casual and sprinkled with laughter.

Speech and sound effects modulate fully into music at the end. First Del Giudice is driving his car and saying that what's happening is like a punch in the stomach for people who need help. Then there's a scene of illegal dumping and tapped voices. Finally comes faint music that rapidly turns into a thundering choral prayer for pity and the end of hatred and cruelty.

We are looking at a kind of festivity in a crowded church courtyard. There are fireworks, a sculpted female figure in a carriage, and a finely costumed young girl who is carried slowly upward by ropes to a tethered balloon and slowly down again. (These scenes, which at first were as mysterious to me as they would be to most non-Italians, form a small but central part in an annual week-long festival held in the nearby town of Giugliano: it is called Madonna della Pace [Madonna of Peace]. The female figure is an ancient statue of the Madonna; the raised girl is selected annually as a symbol of the Madonna; the choral prayer is also specially chosen each year.)

Killing of sheep

Biùtiful Cauntri. Source: www.biutifulcauntri.it.

In the preceding parts of the film there is almost no mention of the Catholic church. (The sheep owner's wife refers once to the local bishop offering 300 euros to those in difficulty.) So I wondered where the church stood on the issue of environmental corruption. Producer Cerri and co-director Calabria told me that although the Vatican has made no comment, the cardinal of Naples and several local priests have spoken out against the illegal dumping.

For most of us, nothing could speak out more clearly than *Biùtiful Cauntri*, an intensely local film with far-reaching resonance.

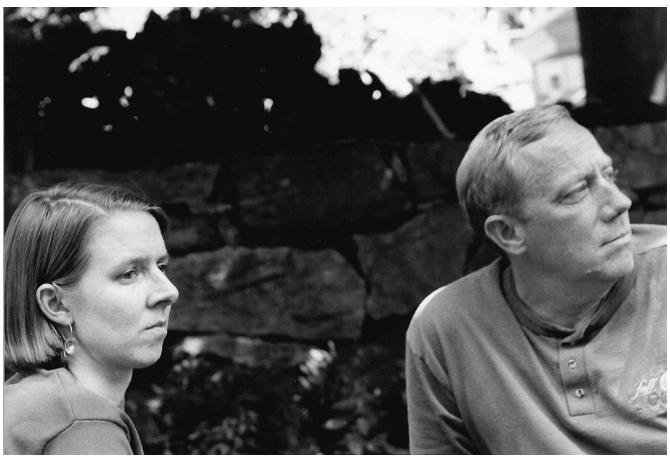
⁂

Katrina Browne, producer and director of *Traces of the Trade*, only gradually became aware of how deeply her forebears named DeWolf were involved in the slave trade. James DeWolf (1764–1837) was the most active, but five of his brothers and one son also took a lengthy and highly profitable part. James, who became a U.S. Senator, was said to be the second richest American, and like many other slave traders he was not a Southerner but a New Englander. He lived in Bristol, Rhode Island, where his ornate house still attracts visitors and the old Episcopalian church has a stained-glass window bearing his name.

Browne felt that she should confront this unpleasant part of her heritage. She tracked down some 200 descendants of DeWolf to see if they were interested in joining her. About sixty replied, and nine of those were willing and able to join her venture.

The venture begins quietly in Bristol as the group looks up old documents and visits buildings associated with the trade. Then, suddenly, they are at Cape Coast, Ghana, which was the port of departure for slave ships to the Caribbean and America.

This plunge into the past raises continuing questions that the participants are not afraid to confront. How does their journey help the blacks they go out of their way to meet, both overseas and back home in America? Is their journey really much more than an elaborate way to salve their consciences? My own answers to those questions sometimes veered close to "very little" for the first and "no" for the second, but at the same time I admired the group for taking the risk of being misunderstood and for their decision to do something rather



Retracing slavery

Traces of the Trade. Courtesy P.O.V.

than nothing. During their visits the group is continually discussing what they are doing and thinking and why they are doing it.

In large part it's the uncertainty and unease of the project that make the film so compelling. It does not have, or aim at, the angry assurance or the visual and aural acidity of *Biùtiful Cauntri*. Here is a group of people grasping at uncertainty, trying to find a way of atoning for a distant ancestor's evil and for indirectly benefiting from it. (Prosperity and privilege seem to have largely passed from generation to generation. All ten of the traveling descendants are comfortably off, and all except one went to an Ivy League college.) I can't think of any precedents for attempting such a personal, lengthy, and elaborate atonement after so long a time.

Ghana is the most obviously dramatic of their experiences. They go into the dark dungeon where the captured Africans were kept until the next ship was ready. It's pointed out that, since the slaves were inlanders, the sound of crashing Atlantic waves outside would have terrified them even more than the darkness. Not only do we see and hear those waves during the day, but there is a remarkable scene of the heaving, glistening offshore waves at night that conveys some of that ancient terror.

On a trip to a forest park they make a small discovery that suddenly connects the distant past with the present. The guide explains that children used to be named by the day of the week on which they were born, and gives a few examples. Katrina recognizes one, Adwoa, as the name of a young girl whom James DeWolf gave as a "present" to his wife and was buried in Bristol. (Most slaves were baptized with a Christian name, as if slavery and Christianity went hand in hand.) Earlier in the film Katrina has shown us the girl's grave in Bristol. Now she says, "So Adwoa was born on a Monday" —and after nearly two centuries the girl becomes an individual of her own time and place.

During the day the ten mingle on the streets and in markets with a variety of blacks, not all of whom are interested in talking with them. They talk with one or two black professors. They also talk with (and listen to) a group of young blacks about their own feelings of shame. And they talk freely among themselves, often differing, with no apparent self-consciousness or smugness. One of the ten says he grew up in Charleston as a racist and still can't overcome his prejudice completely.

The next stop is Cuba, where DeWolf owned a sugar plantation near Havana. The sugar was turned into rum, the basic currency for buying slaves from Africa. Some of his slaves worked on the plantation or were sold in Cuba. The plantation is now abandoned. The group visits a restaurant where they are served an elaborate meal of what is supposed to be "slave food." They are skeptical. It isn't easy to reconstruct or understand the past.

And now, still discussing and politely arguing, they return to the U.S. They meet some more black professors. They talk about reparations. In Bristol, they talk of going to the Episcopal church and apologizing for slavery. It seems for a time that no one is quite sure what they have learned, what they have accomplished or what they can usefully do.

The climax comes with a special service at the Episcopal church. Katrina, as a guest preacher, gives a sermon that ends with her saying that whites have a choice, to feel guilt or to ask what can give wholeness. There is silence from the congregation. A brief prayer, and then the minister invites everyone to stand and leave their pews. He then moves through the church laying hands on the congregants as the gospel song "One Love" is heard on the soundtrack.

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Rather like the festive ending of *Biùtiful Cauntri*, this last scene may at first seem surprising, mysterious, and too upbeat. There is also a strange irony running behind it. The worldwide Anglican church is reaching the point of schism, with many dioceses objecting to the acceptance of a homosexual bishop and a female bishop (with other women on the point of ordination). And it is African dioceses that are most strongly opposed to the acceptance of homosexuals and women in the pulpit.

In neither film, however, does the ending compromise what has been shown before. *Biùtiful Cauntri* ends with people praying for help and hoping. *Traces of the Trade* ends with people hoping and praying for help. There is no pretended closure: at the end of each film the viewer, whether believer or nonbeliever, is left facing its basic problem more clearly than ever, and with an understanding of those trying to confront it.

My thanks to the Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, which not only screened the two films, but also arranged for me to meet Esmeralda Calabria and Lionello Cerri and provided an interpreter.

WILLIAM JOHNSON is a former New York Editor of *Film Quarterly*.

ABSTRACT This essay reviews two documentaries: *Biùtiful Cauntri,* an exposé of waste-disposal criminality in the Naples area of Italy, and *Traces of the Trade*, in which members of New England family uncover their ancestors' deep involvement in the slave trade.

KEYWORDS documentary, slavery, Camorra, environmentalism, reparation

CREDITS *Biùtiful Cauntri,* Directors, writers: Esmeralda Calabria, Andrea D'Ambrosio, Peppe Ruggiero. Producer: Lionello Cerri. Cinematography: Alessandro Abate. Editor: Esmeralda Calabria. Music: Valerio Camporini Faggioni, Guido Zen. Production company: Lumière & Co. World sales: Intramovies.

Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North. Director, producer, writer: Katrina Browne. Editor: Alla Kovgan. Cinematography: Liz Dory. Music: Roger C. Miller. © 2007 Ebb Pod Productions.

NEGOTIATING THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE: THE RECENT WORK OF ADAM CURTIS

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM ASSESSES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORM AND CONTENT IN CURTIS'S DOCUMENTARIES

There's been a steady improvement over the course of the three most recent BBC miniseries of Adam Curtis—*The Century of the Self* (2002, four hour-long episodes), *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear* (2004, three hour-long episodes), and *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (2007, three hour-long episodes)—both in terms of their intellectual cogency and persuasiveness and in terms of the interest of Curtis's developing, innovative style of filmmaking. One might even contend that each remarkable series has been twice as good as its predecessor. Even so, a closer look at Curtis's filmmaking style starts to raise a few questions about both the arguments themselves and the way that he propounds them. (Regarding Curtis's earlier TV series—such as the 1992 *Pandora's Box* and the 1999 *The Mayfair Set*, which I've only sampled, and won't be discussing here—one can already see some of the thematic and stylistic seeds of his more recent work there.)

I'm certainly not the first one to address these issues arising out of Curtis's work. Among my predecessors, I've been especially impressed by the arguments of Paul Myerscough ("The Flow," *London Review of Books*, 5 April 2007) and those of the late Paul Arthur ("Adam Curtis's Nightmare Factory: A British Documentarian Declares War on the 'War on Terror,'" *Cineaste*, winter 2007). Starting off with a discussion of televisual "flow" as described by Raymond Williams in 1973, Myerscough voices some misgivings about sensual overkill as well as intellectual shortcuts and simplifications, concluding at one point that "I find myself more worried by his documentaries when I go along with them than when I don't." Arthur expresses comparable doubts while interrogating some of Curtis's intellectual arguments in greater detail, and also explores the possible relevance of the neo-Marxism of Curtis's former schoolmates Jon King and Andy Gill, founders of the postpunk band Gang of Four.

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The theses of all three of Curtis's series are clearly interconnected. *The Century of the Self* sketches the appropriation of Freud's theory of the unconscious as a consumerist model for manipulating people economically and politically through their unconscious desires—initially by Freud's American nephew Edward L. Bernays, the inventor of "public relations," and subsequently by Gallup polls, Anna Freud's gospel of social conformity, the "Human Potential" movement that tried to overthrow Anna Freud's principles of social conditioning, and the eventual development of focus groups in both the U.S. and the U.K. to sell products, including such political candidates as Reagan, Clinton, Thatcher, and Blair.

The Power of Nightmares offers a parallel history of militant Islamism as spearheaded by Sayyid Qutb and neoconservatism as spearheaded by Leo Strauss to trace the development of a political trend in which fear of manufactured and largely imaginary threats have gradually replaced utopian promises of happiness. This culminates in Curtis's most controversial claim in any of these three miniseries—that the existence of the terrorist network Al-Qaeda is primarily a fiction that was invented in 2001 as a means of gaining and consolidating power.

The Trap to some extent subsumes and extends both of the arguments in the preceding series by maintaining that the western idea of freedom has been reformulated over the past half-century or so from political freedom to economic freedom (viewed as spending power), again with disastrous results. Basic to this overarching ideological shift is the conviction—promulgated largely by game theorists as a way of explaining the dynamics of the Cold War, and eventually taken up by economists and politicians—that human beings are fundamentally selfish, suspicious, and isolated from one another; that notions of collective will can't even be theorized according to the new, market-driven models; and that success and happiness are ultimately measurable in numbers rather than in terms of the quality of whatever is being quantified. Here the major villains often seem to be not George W.

Bush—even though he does get a characteristically inane soundbite ("I believe that the future of mankind is freedom") in the prologue to the first two parts—but Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, for being elected on liberal/labor platforms and then immediately giving away their hard-won power to the banks and markets, meanwhile increasing class inequality in relation to everything from career opportunities to life expectancies in both the U.S. and the U.K. But more generally, what gets vigorously castigated here are irresponsible forms and applications of social science, especially psychiatry, spurred by various forms of capitalism and the numbers game.

A withering examples of the latter, offered in part two of *The Trap*, "The Lonely Robot," is the way in which normal human reactions such as fear, loneliness, and sadness were redefined as medical disorders in order to sell newly developed drugs such as Prozac and create new forms of social management. My own tragicomic favorite is one of the many grotesque consequences of the performance targets that followed Blair's election in 1997: when the government's aim was to reduce the number of hospital patients who had to wait in corridors on trolleys before receiving care, some hospitals would remove wheels from their trolleys and reclassify them as beds, meanwhile reclassifying some corridors as wards.

In all three of these miniseries, one can trace a certain Hegelian convergence of disciplines and theories that becomes all the more ambiguous, exhilarating, *and* unsettling once one starts to realize that this convergence is part of Curtis's own methodology as well as his ostensible subject. In other words, I'm continually being won over by grand explanations for most of our contemporary problems, all of which entail other and presumably lesser minds having been similarly seduced; what might more generally be termed the Eureka mentality is thus posited as both the disease and the diagnosis.

I'm reminded of the most stimulating by far of all the university courses I ever took—a Bard College seminar taught by Heinrich Blücher, the husband of Hannah Arendt, called "Metaphysical Concepts of History and Their Manifestations in Political Reality." Blücher, a former German Communist who never published a word, is lamentably overlooked by many people who didn't know him personally, yet his impact on friends and students as well as on Arendt (who dedicated her *Origins of Totalitarianism* to him) is irrefutable. The dialectical subject as well as the dialectical methodology of his seminar, which focused on such figures as Hegel, Nietzsche, Spengler, Marx, and Freud, grew out of the various seductions and dangers of all-purpose explanations. Virtually every lecture Blücher gave in the seminar described an arc that climbed towards fervent belief before descending towards skepticism. For better and for worse, Curtis's audiovisual arguments tend to move in the reverse direction; they all start very promisingly by tearing down some of the ruling myths of our era, and then arguably conclude in far too satisfying a fashion by implying that once we can shatter those myths, we're almost as wised up as we need to be.

Nevertheless, the value of all three works isn't just the strength of their arguments but the overall freshness and pertinence of part of the information they impart. Speaking for myself, I was less excited by *The Century of the Self* because I'd already read Larry Tye's *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and The Birth of Public Relations* (Crown, 1998)—a book whose revelations for me started in its preface, which explains how the "public relations triumph" that was the "selling of America on the Persian Gulf War . . . was crafted by one of America's biggest public relations firms, Hill and Knowlton, in a campaign bought and paid for by rich Kuwaitis who were Saddam's archenemies."

If memory serves, this tidbit is missing from *The Century of the Self* (although Tye is one of the people interviewed), but the material imparted about Bernays and his legacy—starting with his own coinage of the term "public relations" as a euphemism for propaganda—is pointed, well-chosen, and instructive. (One particular gem in part 2, "The Engineering of Consent," is the story of how housewives were coerced into buying Betty Crocker cake mix once their egos were stroked by the gratuitous instruction that they add one egg to the mix.) And some of it overlaps neatly with material discussed in Naomi Klein's magisterial *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), a book whose own clarifying synthesis of information seems comparable and complementary to some of Curtis's best insights.

I'm thinking in particular of the terrifying exploits of Dr. Ewan Cameron, whose CIA-funded employments of LSD, PCP, and electroshock to hapless patients begin Klein's narrative and are pointedly referenced by Curtis. One might also note that her postulation of Milton Friedman as a guru from hell essentially "rhymes" with Curtis's uses of Bernays in *The Century of the Self*, Strauss in *The Power of Nightmares*, and even Isaiah Berlin and his concept of "negative liberty" in part three of *The Trap*, "We Will Force You To be Free." Indeed, in the closing stretches of the latter, when Curtis is critiquing the disastrously misguided and theoretically driven employments of "shock therapy" in post-communist Russia and, more recently, in Iraq, his arguments seem to coincide fairly precisely with those of Klein. (Another film with certain conceptual parallels to Curtis's three series is Mark Achbar,

Jennifer Abbott, and Joel Bakan's excellent 2003 documentary *The Corporation*.)

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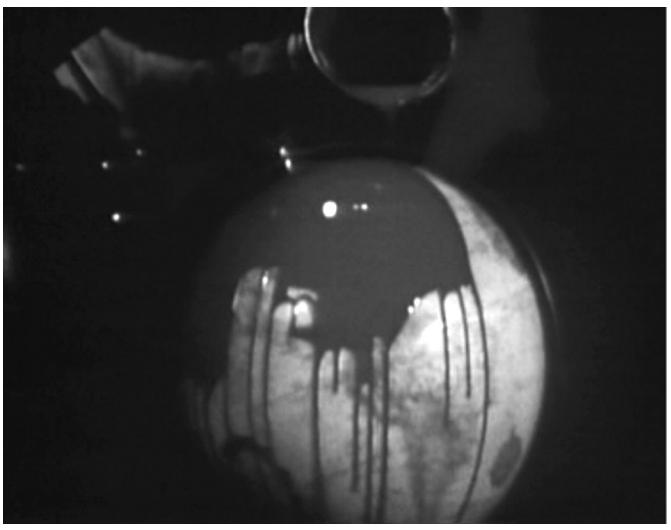
The developing style of Curtis's essayistic documentaries is to alternate talking-head interviews with diverse kinds of found footage, the latter sometimes overlaid by music drawn from Hollywood films. Some of the scores borrowed in *The Power of Nightmares* come from John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and *Prince of Darkness* (1987), *The Ipcress File* (1965), *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1964), two Morricone-scored Italian pictures, and *Neptune's Daughter* (1949)—the last of these being the source for Johnny Mercer's "Baby, It's Cold Outside," which dominates the first episode. And especially memorable in *The Trap* are Bernard Herrmann themes from films by Welles and Hitchcock—a ploy that periodically becomes distracting, perhaps even more so if one is conscious of where they're coming from. I'm not sure how helpful it is, for instance, for the sprightly chase music from *North by Northwest* (1959) to accompany Curtis's aforementioned discussion of performance targets in Blair's version of New Labour and—more briefly later on—his discussion of Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre's espousals of violence in third-world revolutions. Whatever postmodern ironies Curtis might have in mind with these juxtapositions, they really don't add much to the discussion.

The fact that Curtis hasn't acquired rights to either the clips or the music is largely what accounts for them not being better known outside the U.K., although all three series are readily accessible via the Internet for those who go looking for them. (In the U.S., the three parts of *The Power of Nightmares*, the best known of the three series, have become available in issues 2, 3, and 4 of *Wholphin*, a DVD magazine issued by McSweeney's and available in some bookstores as well as through outlets such as Amazon.)



Playfully serious

The Power of Nightmares. © 2004 BBC. DVD: Wholphin.

There seem to be at least three major issues worth addressing about these miniseries. The first is the validity of the intellectual arguments they propound. The second is the validity of the anti-intellectual methodologies they sometimes employ in terms of sound and image, in which the clips and music serve not so much to illustrate the arguments as to weave fanciful and seductive arabesques around them. (These are far more evident in the latter two series, although *The Century of the Self* already suggests this practice when it suddenly intercuts details from 1929 with tracking shots through opulent, apparently Viennese settings that suggest color versions of shots from *Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961.) And the third is the seeming incompatibility of these intellectual and anti-intellectual elements, complicated by the fact that the anti-intellectual elements at times seem to resemble the advertising techniques that are being critically addressed throughout the series, which appeal to unconscious desires more than to conscious and rational formulations.

Given how much the polemical agendas of these three series are bound up with the way that apparently rational intellectual positions can eventually lead to irrational and delusional conclusions, there's a great deal at stake in determining how much intellectual honesty Curtis should be credited with as a filmmaker and not simply as a thinker delivering a voiceover. To all appearances, his voiceover remains serious while his filmmaking periodically oscillates between a serious (that is, rational and readily explicable) illustration of his arguments and fanciful, freeform riffs sailing *over* the arguments, a bit like jazz improvisations. (There are also some images that might be described as both serious and playful, for example the recurring image of red paint being poured over a globe of the world in "The Phantom Victory," part 2 of *The Power of Nightmares*—a Cold War metaphor with a certain amount of mockery in its literalism, but none the less a relatively coherent kind of representation.) And just as jazz solos are typically predicated on following the chords of pre-existing melodies, Curtis's riffs loosely follow the contours of his voiceover arguments that are being heard simultaneously, without being answerable to a comparable linear logic of continuity except by implication.

The issue isn't whether or not the playful improvs are acceptable in their own right. I believe they are, or at least they can be, and on my website (www.jonathanrosenbaum.com) I recently wrote a brief defense of a lively DVD extra—Jean-Pierre Gorin's "A '*Pierrot*' Primer" on the Criterion release of Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965)—that has comparable strengths and limitations. My point there is that once criti-

cism is viewed as a performative act occurring over a fixed period of time, our means of judging such acts can't and shouldn't be precisely the same as the way we regard criticism in print. "The truth is, you cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture," Mary McCarthy once wrote, in a favorable 1959 review of *The Tradition of the New* by Harold Rosenberg, the theoretician of action painting ("An Academy of Risk," in McCarthy's *On the Contrary: Articles of Belief, 1946--1961*, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961, p. 248)—thus pinpointing part of the ontological difficulty posed by performative criticism, where "scoring points" no longer means quite the same thing, existentially speaking, which implies that somewhat different criteria of evaluation may be needed.

Admittedly, even this distinction becomes somewhat problematical as soon as we consider that there are certain instances of print criticism that might be said to function according to performative models. The sole example of the latter that I cited on my website was Manny Farber, although I could have also mentioned the critical prose of several other reviewers, ranging from Godard to Pauline Kael to Manohla Dargis. The only way of resolving this seeming contradiction, I would argue, is that we know and acknowledge what kind of critical discourse we're responding to. And this becomes harder to do when we're confronted with two kinds at once, as we often are in Curtis's televisual discourse.

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I'm not trying to propound the Marshall McLuhan argument here that the medium is necessarily the message. The point of contention here is journalistic shorthand, which exists both in print and in broadcast media and often entails some difference in meaning and content as well as style.

Theoretically speaking, insofar as montages are extensions of the Kuleshov Experiment in which the viewer unconsciously connects certain shots by furnishing them with imagined fictional links, the very act of editing these shots together becomes a form of lying. Therefore the juxtaposition of found materials, including the use of Hollywood scores on the soundtracks of Curtis documentaries, might be said to function as vehicles of persuasion—ploys for helping us to accept the voiceovers but not really legitimate parts of the ongoing argument. Whether we identify these ploys as placebos or as less deceptive vehicles of pleasure is the main issue at stake. Quite apart from Curtis's use of such rhetorical tricks in his narration as unjustifiably describing his own arguments as if they were conclusive demonstrations (as pointed out by both Myerscough and Arthur), there's the broader and somewhat less obvious tactic of making them pleasurable to watch—fun and therefore easy to swallow—as if they were TV commercials.

Most of the footage in *The Power of Nightmares* conventionally illustrates Curtis's voiceovers. Yet all three episodes begin with a freeform montage accompanying his narration that's so open-ended it becomes impossible to identify what one's watching, while additional sounds (a howling wind and periodic stabs of percussive music) increase the overall dreamlike effect. All proportions guarded, it's a bit like the difference in exposition between the enigmatic prologue of *Citizen Kane* (1941) and the "News on the March" that follows it, with the crucial difference that Curtis uses a voiceover in both segments.

Consider just the first four sentences and the accompanying images: initially we see what appear to be blinking bright lights on an airstrip over the sound of the wind. Then, as Curtis says, "In the past, politicians promised to create a better world. [*Music starts.*] They had different ways of achieving this, but their power and authority came from the optimistic visions they offered their people," we're treated to rapid, disorienting, continuous camera movements in a dark and ambiguous space where people are fleetingly glimpsed in the background that eventually becomes, behind the BBC logo, an empty and overlit TV studio anchor space with a shifting backdrop that's gripped from behind by visible fingers. Then, while Curtis continues, "Those dreams failed and today people have lost faith in ideologies. Increasingly, politicians are seen simply as managers of public life, but now they have discovered a new role that restores their power and authority," we get a burst of TV static, another camera movement traversing an indecipherable flash of orange and yellow, a static shot of an ornate chandelier with fading lights (or is it a fadeout in a shot of a chandelier that remains lit?), and then high-contrast black and white footage of a nighttime, flag-strewn political rally that could conceivably be a clip from Eisenstein or Pudovkin. In short, you might say that Curtis is restoring power and authority to his own voice while tossing us into an intractable labyrinth.

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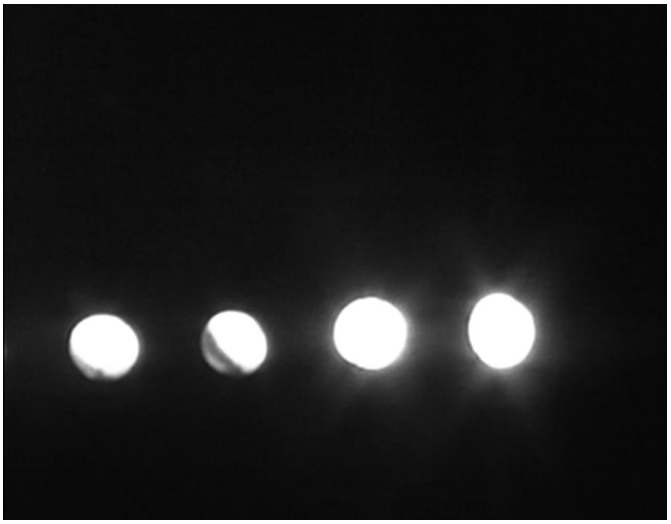
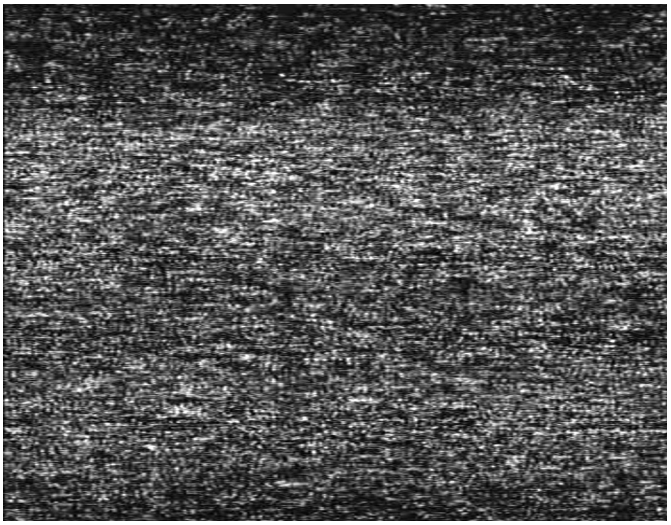
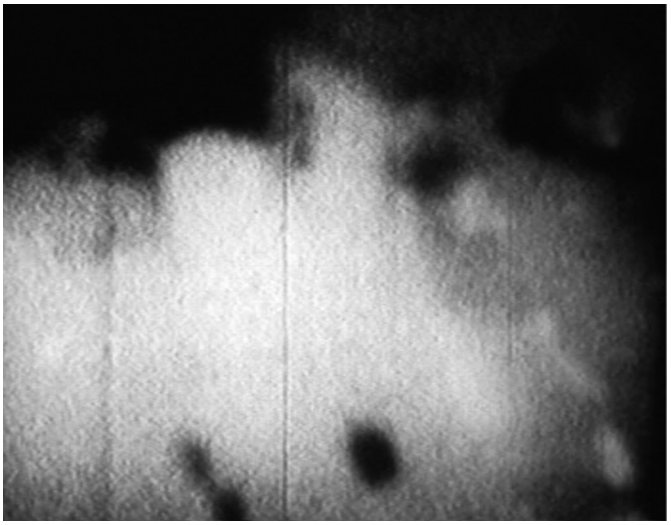
If I can be permitted a couple of extended, autobiographical illustrations of comparably pleasurable media tricks, I can say that, like many others, I've benefited as well as suffered from the kinds of routine distortions practiced by these methods. In the mid-1970s, while living in London, I was once interviewed on BBC radio about Robert Altman's innovative employments of sound in conjunction with an Altman retrospective at the National Film Theatre that I had just helped to organize. It seemed appropriate to offer an analysis of a particular extract from the soundtrack of *California Split* (1974), so I was mortified to discover when I heard the broadcast that the producer had chosen a different and much sim-

"THE PHANTOM VICTORY": A LABYRINTH OF IMAGES







The Power of Nightmares. © 2004 BBC. DVD: Wholphin.

pler extract to illustrate the point I was trying to make—with the result that my analysis sounded to me both inane and inaccurate. But when I phoned her to complain, she argued that editing fixes of this kind were standard and that I was naïve to raise any fuss about them.

By way of contrast, the way I'm used to deliver the climactic thesis of Simcha Jacobovici's feature-length 1998 documentary *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies, and the American Dream*—that the American Dream as articulated by Hollywood was fundamentally a Jewish invention—is no less sinister, at least in its implications, even though this time I was seemingly boosted rather than undermined by the misrepresentation. Indeed, my talking head is positioned so that the entire thrust of the film's preceding argument—actually the argument of Neal Gabler's first-rate and provocative book *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (Crown, 1988), which this film is adapting—appears to be emanating spontaneously from my lips, when I say, "There was a Hollywoodism then, there is a Hollywoodism today. I would go further and say it is what is the ruling ideology of our culture. Hollywood culture is the dominant culture; it *is* the fantasy structure that we're living inside." None of which I exactly disbelieve. But the ugly and awkward coinage "Hollywoodism," used as a derivation of "Americanism"—which doesn't even figure in Gabler's book—would never have passed my own lips if the interviewer hadn't planted it there. If memory serves, all I was doing at that point was agreeing with some rough paraphrase of Gabler's thesis that the unheard and unseen interviewer had offered, meanwhile hoping that the modest personal contribution I'd made to the discussion—about the ways my grandfather, a small-town movie exhibitor, shared many of the values of the studio moguls discussed by Gabler—would be used in the film. (It wasn't.) Nevertheless, an old friend of mine, a professional writer of TV documentaries himself, told me that he concluded at the end of *Hollywoodism* that its overall message, including the coinage of its title, was somehow my own invention.

Such are the everyday, routine spin-offs of the Kuleshov effect in most documentaries employing taking heads and clips. In the same documentary, the same sort of leveling effect allows archival footage of European *shtetls* to casually rub shoulders with a musical number from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), and virtually equates the veracity of black and white newsreel footage of HUAC hearings with the authenticity of color extracts from a representation of those hearings in Irwin Winkler's idiotic and reprehensible *Guilty by Suspicion* (1991).

In an interview with Robert Koehler in the summer 2005 issue of *Cinema Scope*, Curtis defends the practice of his own playful montages as follows: "I don't see why you can't play with pictures when you're being serious. That's my main aim. Because then you get a sense of someone enjoying themselves, and when you get that, then people listen to what you're doing." And I suppose a related argument could be made about some of the more ambiguous procedures in Craig Baldwin's experimental documentaries—*Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991), *¡O No Coronado!* (1992), *Sonic Outlaws* (1995), and *Spectres of the Spectrum* (1999)—which simultaneously mock and indulge in paranoid rants while dovetailing as many technological conspiracy theories as possible.

There's something appealing about leaving the overall degree of seriousness behind the arguments up to the viewer, but there's also a calculated risk. Even though Curtis's arguments register much more seriously than Baldwin's, both filmmakers seem to be operating at times with built-in escape clauses. But how many people who watch television are thinking much about the play or, for that matter, the personality of the filmmakers as reflected in such creative decisions?

It's worth adding that Curtis himself speaks the voiceovers in these series, but never uses the word "I"—even though the arguments are always clearly his own, and when we hear the offscreen questions being asked in various onscreen interviews, it's invariably his voice that's asking them. His overall stance is neither that of the traditional voice-of-God narrator nor that of an essayistic filmmaker like Chris Marker who, in *Sans Soleil* (1982), feels that his speaking voice has to be filtered through one or more fictional intermediaries in order to achieve the kind of guarded intimacy that he wants. But Curtis sounds closer to the voice-of-God narrator insofar as he's banking on the appearance if not the fact of conventional television. And it's finally this appearance that makes his work so debatable as well as innovative. Whether or not this is part of his intention (and I suspect it isn't), Curtis is foregrounding some of the double standards that many of us bring to criticism in separate media simply by banking on them.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM is a *Film Quarterly* Writer-at-Large.

ABSTRACT This essay discusses the most recent BBC documentary series by Adam Curtis: *The Century of the Self, The Power of Nightmares,* and *The Trap.* It is argued that the theses of the films are to a degree undermined by Curtis's reliance on the same persuasive, advertising-style techniques that are being critiqued.

KEYWORDS documentary, *The Century of the Self, The Power of Nightmares, The Trap,* Adam Curtis

GHOST LAW

With the British empire at its turn-of-the-century zenith, a curious shift occurred in the sociology of the English-speaking ghost. Once a haunting had simply marked the site of a traumatic injustice. Now the ghouls of popular fiction were expanding their portfolio; on behalf of the powerful and the ugly of long ago, specters became pitiless watchdogs visiting mayhem on blameless passersby. In the tales of M. R. James—notably *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* in 1904—mild-mannered bachelors, opening tombs or sometimes merely books, have grisly retribution exacted on them for no worse than the scholarly crime of curiosity. A further century has turned—and how do ghosts, wronged or otherwise, ugly or otherwise, comport themselves at the margins of today's empires?

In "The Attic," the conclusion of Adam Curtis's 1995 series *The Living Dead: Three Films about the Power of the Past*, we see clips from *The Innocents*, the 1961 film adaptation of a much more famous *fin de siècle* ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw*; these seem the diverting counterpoint to a documentary about political hubris. Margaret Thatcher's devotion to Churchill's wartime vision of Englishness brought emotional momentum to her project of renewal and rejection, Curtis argues, until shades deep within it brought her low. We've been watching Tory Party talking heads, admiring and cynical; we've been watching current-affairs footage, primarily from the 1970s; we've been watching clips of Deborah Kerr as the governess, another haunted blonde, in *The Innocents*—and then something happens that breaks with all documentary protocols.

Kerr sees Churchill's face, a malicious cherubic sprite, in a locket; looks up, aghast, as a candle gutters in a sudden draft—and here's the great storm of 1987, the worst in 300 years, sweeping out of hell to devastate southern England. Stock-market turmoil breaks the Thatcher spell. It isn't simply that black-and-white documentary footage is slyly matched with black-and-white fiction; it's that it's *supernatural* fiction, policy and economics causally explained by the logic of the beyond. It's exciting because it so brazenly breaks a rule of genre, of form, of expressive politesse. Exact and true as the sequence may feel, such a stunt surely casts the filmmaker, in his turn, in an impishly hard-to-trust light.

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For twenty years, Curtis has been crawling through the vast archive of the BBC, demystifying the follies of empire to humorous and often chilling effect. His proximate target has often been British—his three-part 1999 history of the world of upper-crust arms traders, coup-plotters, and economic saboteurs was called *The Mayfair Set*—but the imperium at issue is always its successor, which is to say America's. Which in the 1990s seemed at *its* zenith, its mightiest foe defeated, its weave of ideologies—the liberal free market, the sanctity of the individual, the efficacy of technologized rationalism—apparently validated by the fact of historical triumph. ("Lo," wrote the implacably imperialist Kipling darkly in 1897, in his uncanny and prophetic poem *Recessional*: "all our pomp of yesterday / is one with Nineveh and Tyre.")

For whatever reason, of all Curtis's series *The Living Dead* is currently the hardest to find; it may also be the richest expression of how he views the world, and his own role. It affirmed his fascination with the Law of Unintended Consequences, laying out the emergence of the post-war market–liberal settlement as a sequence of moves intended to bolster it against its foes, which instead cause it to be eaten from within. Part 1, "On the Desparate Edge of Now," is about the monstering of the defeated criminals who enacted Nazism, including the suppression at Nuremberg of their own account of themselves, and the creation of the necessary myth of the Good War—that imagined conflict in which the soldiers on the winning side saw and did *nothing* untoward to effect this win—and the European disarray after the Yugoslavian crack-up, when the darkest nationalist monsters reappeared out of the heart of the myth. In part 2, "You Have Used Me Too Long as a Fish," Canadian Professor Ewan Cameron's studies in the therapeutic wiping clean of the slate of the unbalanced human mind, adapted by the CIA to create the perfect programmable agent, created an epic blowback, the "wilderness of mirrors" in which everyone, from Lee Harvey Oswald up to the highest in the land, might be an undetectable brainwashed Soviet mole, and all intelligence poisoned by paranoid doubt.

The issue of the provenance of information, and of where trust lies, is at the heart of all Curtis's work, formally and technically as well as topic-wise: and it's some element of this which rattles admirers and detractors both, his approach so bound into his philosophy that the one embodies the other. On one hand, Curtis seems rigorously to present himself as

the last of the old-school philosophical idealists; that's to say, that it's not tribal or class interest that drives society, but what's in elite heads—Thatcher's or Cameron's or Goering's. This unfashionable stance (more overt in Curtis's recent projects, and more angrily challenged) is both his vulnerability and his taboo-busting glamor. We feel naughtily safe in the superb Reithian confidence of his delivery, slightly posh, slightly fussy, perhaps a touch higher and faster than the comfy norm of today's received gravitas, the provenance of his commissions and his material a near-classical reason to trust his pluperfectly informed authority, courtesy his unfettered access to the BBC archive.

And yet what tumbles into *The Living Dead* from these archives—and all the films and music the BBC can so easily excerpt—is hardly conducive to gravitas. "On the Desperate Edge of Now," which will outlay the Nazi spectacle and its "theatre of memories," pasteboard and gimcrack as these often were, begins in the dark forest of Grimm fairytale; blazing arc lights thunk noisily on, to illuminate the stage space between the trees, site of the last terrible days of total war; and we hear the ghastly dream-filtered memories of an American soldier. "You Have Used Me Too Long as a Fish," opens even more oddly: a passel of Soviet diplomats and hangers-on, surrounding Khruschev and clapping, scored to a pop instrumental whose hook is little but its clap-track, the sequence extended until the Russians come across as hysterical robots. It ends with Linda MacDonald, a Cameron patient of long ago, who's described her after-treatment self as an "alien"—and all humanity as "you people"—and finally sits with blithe glee alone in a big-sky prairie field to declare how great it is just to start over, free of all one's troubled past. A film peopled with boffins and diagrams of brains flickers out between clips from two Cold War cult classics of mirror-world panic, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962); the individual is at war with the hive in both, in subtly different ways.

The Living Dead bubbles with similar cheeky mischief, the entire idea of elite authority anything *but* affirmed by the material marshalled. Doubtless the voiceover does self-present as ultimate authority; but the montage all around is chuckling at such a ludicrous concept, pop songs and ad-memes bringing all kinds of other pratfall and spookwork into play, forcing the thesis to connect and interact, to manifest in a wider, a clamoring, a collective world, expanding it and fucking with it. If "The Attic" is a ghost story, "On the Desperate Edge of Now" is a horror story, and "You Have Used Me Too Long as a Fish" is science fiction: which means their pull is in quite unrespectable directions, fully away from respectable current affairs or Reithian pedagogy. In a Curtis project, moral and political seriousness have always to jostle with dry or daft jokes, news form can never healthily be quarantined from fiction, or science from magic. It's a democracy of collage and genre-play, which as it declares its central argument simultaneously throws into doubt where authority should be taken to lie. What brings the images and songs and sounds to life is the manner in which they react, chemically if not alchemically, with their unexpected fellows.

The irony of Curtis's institutional power is indeed that he can do what most montagists cannot: to use almost whatever clip he wants, and any music, *without conditions*. The citational and copyright protocols enforced elsewhere in the grown-up infosphere can be sidestepped. The uncanny in an M. R. James story is a physical, visceral matter: an unavoidable response to the pull of a sound, the feel of a place; no permissions apply. A ghost's authority is no affirmation of the extant temporal power: we are not haunted because the empire's (or the market's) protocols of respect and ownership demand it—precisely the opposite. To defer too carefully to copyright, to negotiate credit too assiduously, is to transform authorial intent—that centerpiece of liberal individualist integrity—into inadvertent corporate flak catcher, patrolling approved meaning and response. The institutional leverage Curtis finds himself with allows him, far more than most, to cede similarly direct authority to the spirit of the material itself—the sight gag, the drum pattern, the play of film stock texture, the fleeting look on someone's face, the hesitancy in the tale they're telling—and to the unseemliness of this.

We don't get to choose what haunts us—it reaches out, unbidden, and grabs. What we get to choose is how we talk about it; how we deal with the fact we've been moved, amused, touched, or terrified. It's this we've even become a little shy of, especially in the more recent projects—particularly *The Power of Nightmares* (2004): how playful and perverse should you allow yourself be, about a war currently being waged? We look to place our trust, perhaps, in some radically oppositional source of authority—instead, a favored son of the last imperial broadcaster presents this seethingly unrespectable collective space which forces our judgment back on ourselves, and how we think, away from intellectual hierarchy: "Yes, ideas *do* have power in this world, but it's not the only power at issue." At one level, *The Living Dead* is a series of films about the catastrophe of this—how the anti-rational can return to haunt us—but at another, it's about its value. Democracy is, above all, a trust placed in the unplanned consequence of the jostling interplay of everyone, even the most uninvited.

MARK SINKER is a *Sight and Sound* contributing editor.

GREY AREAS

"Something extraordinary has happened to American TV since September 11," Adam Curtis told the *Guardian* in 2005. He was preparing to show at Cannes a re-edited version of his 2004 BBC series *The Power of Nightmares*, which questioned the widespread characterization of Al-Qaeda as an organized group presenting a unique existential threat to western society. "A head of the leading networks who had better remain nameless said to me that there was no way they could show it. He said, 'Who are you to say this?' and then he added, 'We would get slaughtered if we put this out.'" Even HBO, Curtis reported, wasn't returning his calls.

The Power of Nightmares went down well at Cannes, and has since been shown at various film festivals in the U.S., generally to great praise, but no American TV network or theatrical distributor has touched it. There's no reason to discount Curtis's impression that its content has been viewed as politically unpalatable, but little of his earlier, less potentially inflammatory work has been shown in the U.S. either. Unapologetically argumentative in the best sense, his mode is at loggerheads with the American premium on perceived objectivity—a U.S. broadcaster would want a counterargument in the same program, he told the website *GreenCine Daily*, and moreover "I think there is a fear of doing ideas on television."

Ideological conservatism notwithstanding, it's worth noting that Curtis's formal techniques also present challenges to wider distribution. The extensive use of archive footage and music that cannot be easily or cheaply cleared is the main reason most of his work remains unavailable on DVD even in the U.K. If the reception to those festival screenings is a reliable indication, then political and copyright reasons stand between Curtis's programmes and a sizeable potential audience: authorized access to this content is restricted because of both its stance and its use of pre-existing audiovisual material. In this sense, it's emblematic of the crucial issues around digital distribution in general.

The 2007 documentary *Good Copy Bad Copy* offers an interesting overview of the copyright situation, surveying the differing laws and societal attitudes in Russia, the U.S., and parts of Africa and Scandinavia. Its interview subjects range from a manager of a Moscow pirate DVD store to DJ Danger Mouse, whose *Grey Album*—an entirely unlicensed mash-up of The Beatles' "White Album" and Jay-Z's *Black Album*—remains a high-water mark of creative, non-profit-generating, unauthorized recontextualization. But *Good Copy Bad Copy* is also interesting as a case study in its own subject matter: aired on Danish television, it then appeared on The Pirate Bay—a file-sharing nexus featured in the film itself—and is now available at goodcopybadcopy.net for free through a Creative Commons license, a sort of progressive qualified copyright that stipulates which kinds of use are permissible.

Those who missed or haven't had the chance to watch Curtis's work have a number of unofficial online options. His programs can often be found on YouTube, but higher-quality files are also uploaded to sites that specialize in distributing material unlikely to find a home with major broadcasters. At documentary-film.net, for instance, there are copies of *The Power of Nightmares*, *The Mayfair Set* (1999), and *The Century of the Self* (2002), and (at the time of writing) around eighty other titles which have either never been broadcast or are not commercially available. The site presents itself as a model of direct-access distribution: "The Documentary Film Network offers a complete solution," it non-specifically claims, "and bridges the gap between film makers and their audience." Many of the films are free to view, others cost the equivalent of a few dollars, and their subject matter and quality vary considerably. Alongside comic broadsides from activist stand-ups like Rob Newman and Mark Thomas can be found exposés of the Australian immigration system and under-tested pharmaceuticals and a wide range of conspiratorial theses on the usual subjects, from the death of Diana to, of course, September 11.

One of these, *Loose Change* (2005, loosechange911.com), is often described as the most successful Internet-distributed movie to date—with some justification, at least in terms of the size of its audience. Its nonprofessional makers have directly sold over a million copies on DVD, and for a long time it was Google Video's most popular file. It asserts that the 9/11 attacks were an inside job by the American government, combining genuinely troubling inconsistencies in the official version of events, circumstantial evidence, and unconvincing rhetoric. (That the film has been through three iterations so far in response to robust rebuttals is some indication of its

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argument's weaknesses.) Its politically provocative stance and copious use of copyrighted broadcast news footage would make its mainstream transmission difficult, at least in the U.S., so its popularity could be seen as evidence of a significant demand for ideas unacceptable to the mainstream. At the same time, its lack of journalistic rigor could be cited as support for the old-media gatekeeping model.

If Curtis knows that his work is keeping such online company, it is not certain that he would approve. Although often described by detractors as a conspiracy theorist, his arguments in fact tend in the opposite direction: he might describe history through narrative, but doesn't believe it has intentional authors. "Where people do set out to have conspiracies, they don't ever end up like they're supposed to," he remarked to Errol Morris in an interview published in *The Believer*. "History is a series of unintended consequences." Ideas might shape the world, but those who have them or promote them seldom get the results they wish for.

On the Internet, however, *Loose Change*-style polemics alleging highly placed, highly efficient conspiracies have proliferated and are consistently among the most watched uploads on such sites as Google Video. The positive view of this is that it represents a broadening of expression, a means for the dissemination of ideas that would otherwise be suppressed. The negative view is that it represents something like the ultimate triumph of the emotion- and desire-led individuation whose cultivation and exploitation Curtis explored in *The Century of the Self*—a world in which truth is an inherently subjective notion and the rejection of hierarchical authority tends towards radical uncertainty.

Nowhere online is the notion of truth more acutely at stake than at Wikipedia. In *The Truth According to Wikipedia* (2008)—a sharp and wide-ranging overview of wikipistemology made by the liberal Dutch broadcaster VPRO and available on its YouTube channel and numerous other online sources—the opposing arguments are put by authors Charles Leadbeater, who views the participatory Internet as "the best hope of creating the basis for democratic politics" in countries with authoritarian regimes, and Andrew Keen, who suggests that "everything becoming more personalized is resulting, in reality, in less democracy, less equality and less freedom . . . We all are more and more isolated . . . Everyone is overwriting everyone else's notion of truth . . . You're doing away with the gatekeeper."

Curtis, always suspicious of utopianism, would back the gatekeeper. "On the surface, [the Internet] says that it is a new form of democracy," he told theregister.co.uk, which supports a plurality of voices and opinions. But "far from being the wisdom of crowds, it's the stupidity of crowds. Collectively, what we are doing is creating a much more simplified world." Bloggers, he suggests, are "just bullies [who] often don't get out enough . . . They're so entrenched in their self-referential groups, anyone who joins up the dots in any other way is a bad person."

Adam Curtis on Google Video

The Century of the Self. © 2002 BBC.

In fact, the withering of the gatekeeper even in the mainstream media is the theme of a short sequence Curtis contributed to Charlie Brooker's BBC show *Screenwipe* in 2007. Searchable on YouTube as "The Rise and Fall of the TV Journalist," the four-minute thesis is scathing about the news media's embrace of emotion-based reportage and so-called "citizen journalism," insisting instead on the now somewhat old-fashioned-sounding notion that the journalist's responsibility is to inform viewers and broaden their perspective, rather than coddling or confirming preconceptions.

So while Curtis benefits from the Web as a distribution platform, he deplores what he sees as its tendency to promote groupthink. His expressive use of montage and recontextualized material, however, seems right at home online, foreshadowing mash-up content and the endless cross-referencing of the blogosphere. He once described the BBC archive from which he mines so much to the *Observer* as "this odd collage, an accidental treasure trove. You sit in a darkened room, watch all these little news moments, and look for connections." It sounds like hyperlink heaven.

BEN WALTERS is the author of *The Office* (BFI TV Classics, 2006).

MOVING VIOLATIONS

Grand Theft Auto is the videogame series notorious for allowing you to hire a prostitute and then kill her and get your money back. The recently released *Grand Theft Auto IV* garnered almost unanimous critical praise and broke entertainment industry records by taking in over $500 million in its first week (outgrossing any Hollywood movie release), helped perhaps by familiar media accusations of immorality. The opportunity to shoot cops, run over pedestrians, and bludgeon passersby with a baseball bat no doubt attracts players, but the game's pleasures go beyond bloodlust. What makes this series so gripping is not that it requires you to perform extremes of ultra-violence, but that it offers an immense, open-ended environment where such actions are possible. *GTA IV* allows for more innocent and even banal pleasures too: cruising through the city listening to the radio, people-watching on a busy street corner, bowling with friends, surfing the Web. Harshly criticized for its social irresponsibility, *GTA IV* in fact encourages players to spend substantial amounts of time nurturing social relationships. And *GTA IV* has a remarkable capacity for making players queasy with emotions rarely touched by videogames—remorse, melancholy, and self-doubt. Violence is only one element in the equation: the experience of the game is fascinating because you can spontaneously jump between different modes of play.

You take the role of Niko Bellic, an immigrant from Eastern Europe haunted by the unspeakable things he has seen and done in his war-torn homeland. Niko arrives in Liberty City (a fictional stand-in for New York) to start a new life. But he soon finds himself working his way through the criminal underworld doing jobs for various gangland bosses. Playing the game, you can follow the goal-oriented progression of these jobs or missions, or you can ignore them and strike out on your own. The staggeringly detailed city—changing weather and traffic patterns, pedestrians dashing out of the rain with newspapers over their heads, cabbies flicking cigarette butts out their windows—provides a vast "sandbox" for unstructured, nonlinear gameplay. You can wander around the streets stealing any car you see and mugging any person you encounter. But you can also hire a cab to tour the city, take your girlfriend out for a game of pool, check your email (including spam) at an Internet café, or even just stay home and watch TV. Playing *GTA IV* is designed to encourage wild improvisation, with spur-of-the-moment shifts between the rise-of-an-immigrant-gangster narrative and its disruption by infinite digressions: "What happens if I do *this*?"

In a game world where every person, object, and location presents an opportunity for some sort of illicit interaction, players relish the dark absurdity of their criminal potential as much as the crimes in themselves. Resourceful players discover that if you are stranded in a deserted part of the city with no means of transportation, you can dial 911 on your cell phone and then carjack the ambulance that arrives to rescue you. Scenarios like this are not built into the missions, nor could the game developers have predicted all the ways that people might play the game. Rather, *GTA IV* spurs players to test the system's technical and ethical boundaries and to create their own goals. Thus players can devote themselves to discovering spectacular suicidal stunt jumps, or to shooting anyone who litters.

With such freedom, what you actually choose to do in *GTA IV* takes on more significance. The potential for impromptu brutality is latent even in mundane situations—you can just as soon beat a street vendor to death as buy a hotdog from him. But these violent acts are not imbued with any sense of dramatic tension. They unfold casually like a series of non sequiturs: pick up your date, mow down a homeless person, walk into a bar. The juxtapositions are disconcerting. Unlike in other bloody videogames, there is no valor in *GTA IV's* combat. You are not a war hero saving the human race from aliens, but a thug as corrupt as the ones you are hired to kill. Most players will find that their transgressive kicks are always edged with unease. Because the game allows but does not prescribe behavior, the issue of accountability is always present. Consequences are not predictable and what you find yourself doing may disturb you. Killing the driver of a car will cause her to slump over the wheel so that the horn blares in a continuous wail. If a random bystander is shot in the leg during your no-holds-barred killing spree, he doubles over and crawls away in agony. There are more human details and fewer eruptions of blood in *GTA IV* than in previous versions, so the violence can feel painful and wretched rather than uninhibited and exhilarating.

The moral landscape of the game is further complicated by the friendships and romances that you are required to cultivate, a gameplay dynamic familiar from such games as *The*

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Violence alternates with networking

Grand Theft Auto IV. © 2006—2008 Rockstar Games Inc.

Sims but new to *GTA IV*. Not only do you spend a lot of time hanging out with various characters—drinking, eating, playing darts and pool, visiting cabaret bars and strip clubs—you also have to return their text messages and emails. While free-roaming the city, you must constantly attend to social obligations and respond to cues. Within the game's strange logic, you can run down people on the street with impunity, but you will be punished for ignoring a phone call from your cousin.

Like certain other screen mafiosi (a homophonous recent example is Viggo Mortensen's character Nikolai in *Eastern Promises*), Niko derives no joy from the dirty work. In a substantial departure from previous versions of the game, the *GTA IV* protagonist is troubled by his crimes. He is as interested in redemption as in money and power and it is notable that he moves more slowly than the former protagonists. Although it might frustrate many gamers' desire for breakneck maneuverability, this subtle adjustment in pacing uses gameplay to enrich characterization. It is as if Niko were weighed down by a moral exhaustion that may transfer also to players. Should Niko betray a close but not very useful friend to gain cash and status? Execute a black drug dealer who has been hypocritically branded a dangerous criminal by a crooked white cop? Every decision to take or spare a life has consequences in how the story unfolds—how characters respond to you, what sections of the game are accessible—but the game never affirms whether a choice is right or wrong. Thus *GTA IV* sometimes takes on the quality of an ambiguous morality tale, but although moral reflection is encouraged by the game, it does not dominate. Niko's lamentation over the atrocities he has witnessed and committed—"The creature that could do this . . . doesn't have a soul"—are tinged with irony and they need not stop players from enjoying the game's most bloody amusements.

The gameplay additionally undercuts its reputation for mindless violence by creating an extensive media environment which you can access at almost any point. Information and entertainment stream throughout the game such that, overall, it is more accurate to describe *GTA IV* as a form of creative multitasking than an extended rampage fantasy. In Liberty City, you switch between traditional action and media consumption that includes in-game TV news, talk radio, reality shows, dating websites, and email. *GTA IV* understands that fictional violence offers only a limited kind of pleasure and so it offers something more gratifying: to be able to steal, kill, and cause general havoc while also scanning billboard ads, flipping radio stations, and talking on your cellphone.

IRENE CHIEN is a Ph.D. candidate in Film and New Media at the University of California, Berkeley.

SPATTER PATTERN

Dexter, Showtime's serial killer soap opera, follows a sociopath who works for the forensics lab of the Miami Police Department. Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) is a blood-spatter analyst who solves crimes by charting red spray patterns and trajectories, taking a ghoulish delight in tracing the abstract art of violence. But when Miami-area murderers are acquitted or avoid arrest, Dexter hunts them down and kills them himself, out of what he calls a sense of "civic pride." On his own time, Dexter murders them and dumps their dismembered bodies from his boat, *Slice of Life*, into the ocean.

Dexter's "code" allows him only to kill other killers, so the viewer indulges him and actually grows fond of him. He may be a serial killer, but he's good with kids, and he buys doughnuts for his co-workers. As in the Ripley novels of Patricia Highsmith—or the notorious scene in which Norman Bates disposes of Marion Crane's car in Hitchcock's *Psycho*—there is transference at work in *Dexter*, an unlikely and guilty pleasure in identifying with the practical problems of a killer. The truth is that if Dexter gets caught, all the fun ends.

Another pleasure of *Dexter* (based on the novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay) is the show's devilish parody of the crime show, the jargon of crime labs and the endless nightly televised entertainment of gore-soaked crime scenes. In CBS's *CSI: Miami* franchise, for example, the moral indignation of the investigators only serves to disguise the truth that America craves blood work after dinner. CBS, the CSI channel, is also Showtime's parent company, and showed late night reruns of *Dexter*. Both shows use the backdrop of Miami (apparently a hell of never-ending massacres), to the extent that Dexter almost seems like a wicked spoof of *CSI: Miami*. *Dexter*'s cinematographer, Romeo Tirone, describes the show's look as "film noir graphic novel." Tirone's HD Miami (some of which is Long Beach) looks lush, hyperreal. Inside, blood spills, drips, and sprays over condo walls, evoking comic books. The producers of Dexter know what America wants, but they also show how sick it is. Hitchcock surely would have appreciated Dexter—the show's tone resembles the grim jokes in his corpse comedy *The Trouble with Harry*. Dexter's revels in blood spatter, both in his day job and his nighttime sport, also recall the tongue-in-cheek Grand Guignol effects of films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Fargo*, where obviously fake "horrific violence" is played for laughs.

The narrative arc of season 1 of *Dexter* charted the investigation of the Ice Truck Killer (Christian Camargo), a serial murderer who turned out to be Dexter's long-lost brother, Brian. Brian (now named Rudy Cooper) insinuated himself back into Dexter's life, stirring up long-suppressed memories of witnessing his mother's murder. Rudy seduced and planned to kill Debra (Jennifer Carpenter), a homicide detective and Dexter's adoptive sister, hoping to enlist Dexter and subvert his code. This code was taught to Dexter by Debra's father, Harry (James Remar), the cop who found Dexter sitting next to his butchered mother in a two-inch pool of blood, adopted the child, and raised him to be a killer of killers.

Season 2 opens with a frustrated Dexter recounting the precise amount of time—thirty-eight days, sixteen hours, and twelve minutes—since his last kill, his brother. "I really need to kill somebody," Dexter muses. "I've always enjoyed my work." But he can't, because he is being watched by a coworker, Sergeant James Doakes (Erik King), a "human bloodhound" and former Special Forces soldier who suspects him. And when Dexter gets the chance to kill, he twice botches his chances, leading to a crisis of self-doubt. Worse, Dexter's secret underwater stash of dismembered bodies, his "human harvest," has been discovered accidentally by treasure divers. The new mass killer is dubbed "The Bay Harbor Butcher," and the FBI is brought in, with Dexter's own crime lab (and his own sister) set working to capture him.

In season 1, Dexter developed a romantic relationship against his better judgment, and found in himself a surprising capacity for protective acts of kindness. He can't feel anything, but he employs a fake-it-till-you-make-it strategy for imitating normal life. His love interest is Rita Bennett (Julie Benz), a single mom with two children in the clutches of an abusive jailbird ex, Paul (Mark Pellegrino). Even when Paul grows threatening Dexter struggles with his desire to kill him, ultimately rejecting the idea as unethical because of his code (Paul is vile but not a murderer). Instead, Dexter shoots him full of heroin so that he will be sent back to prison for breaking his parole.

In season 2, Rita discovers what Dexter has done to Paul, and because of the heroin-related nature of his actions, she demands that he attend group sessions at Narcotics Anonymous, mistakenly thinking he is himself addicted to

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drugs. There, Dexter meets a darkly beautiful English sculptor, Lila (Jaime Murray), who becomes his sponsor, encouraging him to resist his addiction, even though she doesn't know at first what Dexter's true addiction entails. Initially, Dexter is completely seduced by Lila, entering into a sexual relationship of mutually assured destruction, and abandoning his more solid moorings with Rita. Lila seems to offer Dexter a more honest life, free from murder, but it turns out that whenever someone she loves tries to leave her, she has a nasty habit of immolating them in their sleep. The blue-eyed Rita and the dark-eyed Lila battle for Dexter's soul throughout season 2. When Lila discovers the truth about Dexter, she's willing to accept him for what and who he really is. Dexter ultimately prefers Rita, but his decision to leave Lila puts the lives of Rita's children in danger.

In another ironic turn, Dexter's pursuer, Doakes, is himself misidentified as the Bay Harbor Butcher. Doakes discovers a leather "trophy" case filled with bloodstained slides hidden in Dexter's condo, and follows him to an isolated Everglades cabin owned by a cocaine dealer who helped murder Dexter's mother. The dragnet tightens around the Butcher, all the clues pointing to a perpetrator inside the force. But when the police find the slides in Doakes's car, he and not Dexter becomes the prime suspect.

Plotlines don't do the series justice. The story is deliberately ludicrous, a baroque, involuted, grimmer-than-Grimm fairytale. Every melodramatic sidebar is dissolved in acidic sarcasm. *Dexter*'s cast works the impossible scenarios by giving the impression of real people trapped in an ongoing nightmare. Hall, who memorably played a gay undertaker, David Fisher, on *Six Feet Under*, is demonically droll as Dexter, a master of a rictus both frightening and oddly comforting. Hall puts on a wonderfully witty double performance, of Dexter being Dexter and of Dexter pretending to be human, using an easy-going generosity to play the role of the ideal boyfriend, brother, and friend. As Debra, Carpenter manages to be gangly, goofy, clumsy, tough, and loveable. Benz, playing Rita, is exasperated, oblivious, and ultra-sincere, but radiates a powerful softness so strong and good that one feels it might make Dexter almost human, given time. Dexter's best friend, Detective Angel Batista, is played by David Zayas as professionally wise but hopeless in love and clueless about his chum's true nature. Dexter's boss, Lt. Maria Laguerta (Lauren Vélez), is a scheming and tough but not heartless career woman. She also protects Dexter from suspicion at work despite her feelings for her ex-partner Doakes. C. S. Lee, as Dexter's wisecracking lab partner, Vincent Masuka, given some of the show's best lines, is hilariously dry, almost undead, perhaps scarier than Dexter. Added to this

Good with kids.

Photo: Showtime Home Entertainment/Paramount Home Entertainment

core cast for season 2 is Murray's Lila, who exudes a shark-like thrilled malice to enliven a stereotypical hell-hath-no-fury role. Keith Carradine plays FBI Special Agent Frank Lundy, the lead investigator on the Butcher case. Lundy is a super-sleuth and so called "mindhunter," but he takes after Dale Cooper in *Twin Peaks*, carrying an official-looking briefcase filled with a blank notebook, delicious tea, and a picnic lunch when he is out hunting monsters.

What matters in *Dexter* is not so much what happens, but rather a certain tone, chilly and mocking, a sociopath's vision of ordinary life, often heard as a voiceover using Dexter's interior commentary on the world and the people around him. "I'm not human," Dexter suggests to the apparition of his dead brother in a church, just after casting a professional eye at the blood pattern on Christ's stab wound in a sculpture of the pietà.

That tone never seems mad, however, because in *Dexter* normal life is portrayed as so fundamentally screwed-up. "I'm fine," Doakes says after killing two men in the line of duty. "I'm fine," Debra says as she returns to work after her ordeal at the hands of the Ice Truck Killer. In *Dexter*, normal life is portrayed as so demented that a serial killer's personality is not very much different from anyone else's. In a brief scene in episode 2, Dexter finds a helpful if unintentional accomplice in the police weapons room, a man who shows Dexter how to use an alligator tranquillizing pistol (a black-and-white photograph of Nazi soldiers hangs on his office wall). It's fair enough to say that Dexter is totally perverse, like a Jacobean blood tragedy: with a similarly phantasmagorical relish as plays such as John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. The show's basically surreal nature effectively dodges the bullet of a sustained moral critique, which would be humorless and off-point. "I'm not so much doing this to you as I'm doing it for me," Dexter explains to a gangster before dispatching

Photo: Showtime Home Entertainment/Paramount Home Entertainment

him. This pantomime of the slogans of self-actualization is a ruthlessly accurate *reductio ad absurdum*: how does one go about releasing one's true nature, as all the talk shows suggest, if one's true nature happens to be that of a killer?

In season 2's most intriguing episode, "The Dark Defender" (written by Tim Schlattmann and directed by Keith Gordon), Dexter watches the progress of the investigation against him take an unexpected turn. When the identities of the Butcher's victims are revealed to be murderers, the public applauds him, elevating Dexter to the status of a folktale avenger or comic-book anti-hero. And indeed Rita excoriates him for disappearing at night "like Clark fucking Kent," but the FBI describes the Butcher as more like one's own "personal Batman." Batman is an apt comparison, although Dexter prefers to violate Batman's aversion to killing. Both live outside the law, "part human, part mutant," as Dexter puts it. Both cling to an ethos riddled with perplexities and contradictions. Visiting a comic-book shop, Dexter finds himself transformed on a handmade superhero poster from Butcher into The Dark Defender, a protector of the city and the executioner of its predators. Vigilantes simultaneously share territory with cops and outlaws, they break the law in the hopes of helping society. For Dexter, this paradox becomes acute when he solves a case with DNA evidence, then decides to murder the perpetrator himself rather than turning his definitive evidence over to the police. It seems Dexter sometimes omits or manipulates evidence while doing his blood-spatter analysis in order to allow killers to escape the police so that he can take a more personal approach. Dexter describes being "half sick with the thrill, the complete wrongness," when the "dark passenger" inside him takes command.

At the start of season 1, Dexter is a classic scourge, eliminating evil without being capable of good. By the middle of season 2, however, Dexter finds himself awestruck by beginning to lose some of his sociopathic nature, largely through his relationship with Rita, her kids, and his longstanding affection for Debra. "Lately," he explains, "there are these moments when I feel." Little by little, Dexter finds himself capable of becoming human, and apart from the storylines of individual episodes and full seasons, a larger question is encoded into the narrative arc of the show. Is it possible that one day Dexter will lose his desire to kill or become completely normal, feeling rather than pretending? Unlikely—the show takes pains to preserve the malicious appeal of Dexter's sociopathic "lifestyle choice"—but the possibility entails a different kind of suspense. In season 1, Dexter thinks that his adoptive father taught him the code in order to channel his murderous impulses, but throughout season 2 it appears that Harry deliberately socialized Dexter as a killing machine to take revenge on the world's uncaught murderers. Dexter's "true self," then, involves neither nature nor nurture alone. The show doesn't theorize about personality disorders, but nobody has answered this question about violent criminals very well. Dexter goes into a higher register as quality drama when it considers these problems, repeatedly flashing back to Dexter's fragmented memories of his mother's murder. At these moments, the show is genuinely frightening. "I'm Dexter, and I'm not sure what I am," he explains in group therapy, sounding like Iago. By the end of season 2, Dexter has decided that he will remain a killer: "Recovery isn't an option." But he has at least experienced an emotional breakthrough. Dexter feels something new, regret over his temporary loss of Rita.

Dexter explores the wickedness lurking in everyday life. In one scene, a car salesman shows Dexter how the patented "Stow and Go Seating" in a minivan can be quickly converted into mobile torture chamber. "Want a real glimpse of human nature?" Dexter muses at one point. "Stand in the way of someone's mocha latte." In another telling moment, Doakes discovers Dexter fiddling with something on his computer at work, and closes in, hoping to find him doing something incriminating. Alas, it is only porn, which Dexter has planted on his screen to disguise what he's really up to. Doakes, however, isn't fooled; he puts Dexter on notice that he's done some digging and that he knows Dexter hasn't rented pornography in years. The point is distressing and subversive: a "healthy" person *should* look at pornography in a blood-spatter analysis laboratory, while the true sociopath only pretends to do such things in order to appear normal. Sociopathic behavior is simply human behavior minus that certain something—soul, heart—that separates us not from the animals but from the robots.

Dexter's true theme is arguably what Freud called "the psychopathology of everyday life." What happens when one fails to "Enjoy!" life as much as television commands? *Dexter* sees the mildly psychotic nature of car salesmen, the bloodlust at the core of the American crime dramas, and the prurient media feeding frenzy for any true crime story involving the gruesome dispatch of vulnerable people. Far from recoiling from these base impulses, *Dexter* revels in them until their obscenity becomes a joke. Dexter is the antidote to *CSI: Miami*; one poison cancels out another, as in a medieval spell. *Dexter* is rendered nontoxic for those viewers who accept the principle that the frisson of fake violence is not at all the same as a taste for the real thing.

J. M. TYREE is a Jones Lecturer in Fiction at Stanford University's Creative Writing Program.

DVD DATA *Dexter: The Complete Second Season*. Various directors. © 2008 Showtime Networks Inc. DVD: CBS Home Entertainment/Paramount Home Entertainment, 2008. $42.99, 4 discs.

STUDYING "SOFT" SEX

LINDA WILLIAMS

Porn studies of the late 1980s and 90s were predetermined by the anti-porn feminism of the late 70s and early 80s. Scholars of hardcore had to situate the "respect" due pornography in relation to a vehement anti-pornography feminist stance that viewed the genre's explicit sexual representations as a quintessentially masculine objectification of women. Because of these vociferous debates, studies of hardcore films and video, for better or worse, received a kind of scholarly attention through seemingly endless debates, close readings, attacks, and defense. The core issues around hardcore were grounded on the assumption that this was a genre whose address was only to men.

Softcore on the other hand has received comparatively little attention or respect, whether from popular critics, academic analysts, or even their own numerous but apparently ashamed fans. Too soft for the controversy that greeted the bold explicitness of hardcore and straight-to-DVD titles, softcore films have performed a quieter revolution, even sneaking onto some of the higher-to-reach shelves of the pornophobic Blockbuster. All three of the authors of these studies are determined to show that softcore movies—especially the kind that are shown on late night cable or released direct to video—deserve admission to the pantheon of film genres worthy of critical attention. Just as surely as hardcore, these films have crept into our living rooms and bedrooms. But distinct from hardcore, they have attracted surprising female interest, verging on fandom.

Linda Ruth Williams is the pioneer in the academic and feminist study of softcore with her *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, published in 2005. David Andrews followed with his 2006 *Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in Its Contexts*. Nina Martin's *Sexy Thrills: Undressing the Erotic Thriller* appeared in 2007. All three books assert the importance of a genre of softcore erotica with a complicated legacy: it has been disparaged both as sex film manqué (not explicit enough) and yet still as a kind of pornography for women. Linda Ruth Williams calls it the cinematic equivalent of "*coitus interruptus*"—"if hardcore really does it, softcore merely fakes it. If hardcore hangs on the authenticity of the real view (that adolescent shock of seeing people *actually getting off*), softcore holds back, cannot show, kisses but finally does not tell" (269, 270). While this leaves open the question of whether all sex in movies that is not explicit should be called softcore—since not all of this sex is so prominent and so overtly aimed at titillation—what may be most significant about the softcore genre is its apparent appeal to male *and* female viewers.

The softcore examined by all three of these writers can exist in its own right (as Andrews especially shows) but it often simulates sex scenes with narrative thrills and danger. Erotic thrillers especially thrive on the (always qualified) display of dangerous, illicit sex. Like hardcore, these softcore sex scenes occur frequently in direct-to-video forms and they take up as much screen time as that devoted to the thriller plot. But the very term "erotic thriller" (as opposed to, say, "sex thriller") means that the films are at least welcoming to the heterosexual women who may be joining their male partners on what is called the "viewing sofa." Both Williams and Andrews have a great many interesting things to say about the masturbatory and copulatory potential of this viewing situation and the general impact of sexual viewing practices that now take place in the privacy of the home. Andrews notes, for example, the relative permission granted clitoral-discovering masturbating women in the late twentieth century in contrast to certain persisting stigmas for masturbating men.

The thrill of the so-called erotic thriller is twofold: it marries the narrative suspense of the noir crime genre with softcore sexual spectacles that often place women protagonists in the position of sexual voyeurs and dominators who now call the sexual shots. Perhaps the most impressive thing about the female protagonists of these films is that even in the context of noir crime dramas the women protagonists are not punished for their sexual escapades, as women in more main-

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stream genres are. They are more likely to grow, bond with other women (both emotionally and sexually as in the girl–girl sex scenes much discussed by all these authors), and thus free themselves from male dominance, especially from the perennially boring, if not outright bad, husbands who seem to proliferate in the genre.

Does this make the erotic thriller a feminist genre? Certainly not in its most mainstream incarnation, as Williams is careful to point out. The first half of her generous, amply illustrated book is devoted to "Blockbuster Thrills: Erotic *Noir* in the Mainstream." She lays out the history of the rise of the erotic thriller from familiar tropes of film noir. She shows how the femme fatale and the doomed fall guy became sexually reinflected in the 1980s as the "good-bad girl," whose sexuality does not doom her to death in the end, while the "homme fatal" and the female investigative heroine became new fixtures. Through the careers of writer–directors such as Joe Eszterhas and Paul Verhoeven and actors such as Michael Douglas, Sharon Stone, Linda Fiorentino, and, perhaps most interestingly, Gina Gershon—many of whom she also interviews—Williams traces the arrival of a genre we recognize as the big-budget erotic thriller with major stars. Weaving a rich tapestry of influences from William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980), through Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Body Double* (1984), and the more recent *Femme Fatale* (2002) to *Jagged Edge* (1985), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and *Basic Instinct* (1992), Williams provides detailed analysis of the bockbuster erotic thrillers and the careers of their main players.

Combining scholarship and gossip-rich background, Williams thus offers an accessible, reader-friendly historical account of the rise of the erotic thriller as a recognizable genre. In fact, she has written at least two books: twin histories of both the genre in its blockbuster Hollywood form, and its low-budget, direct-to-video counterpart. She asks the crucial historical question: "why did these films appear when they did, and who are they made for?" (3). Her answers range from multiplex to arthouse to home and hotel-room audiences. Williams also writes with wit. For example, quoting Dolly Parton's classic quip, "It takes a lot of money to look this cheap," Williams expands upon the distinctive look of the erotic thriller: "However much money you throw at an erotic thriller, it will always look like the sensation genre fare that it is, driven by the values of an exploitation potboiler, with its fingers in a blockbuster's expense account and its feet in the cheap shagpile carpet" (5). If *Basic Instinct* is the upscale model that spawned it all, the great virtue of Williams's book is to show the affiliation of a *Basic Instinct* with thrillers made at one-fortieth of the cost.

While Williams deserves the most credit for producing the first book to define and give a nuanced history to the genre in both its high and low forms, at 466 small-print pages this study is almost too choc-full. By the time we get to a discussion of erotic thrillers through the career of Michael Douglas (an apt approach as Douglas was the quintessential guilty and quasi impotent male of the 1990s) we have already had ample opportunity to ponder such questions as the audience-dictated—"Kill the bitch"—ending of *Fatal Attraction*. And by the time we get to the discussion of Douglas's other emblematic role as the guilty cop in *Basic Instinct*, we have already been over the territory of femme fatale and "castrated cop"—and that is just in the first half of the book! There are thus both strengths and limits to Williams's approach through star careers. I particularly appreciated the section on Gina Gershon which captures this actor's uncanny ability to be a star who is "nothing and everything, both lesbian *and* heterosexual" (205), though in my opinion Williams's vehement hatred of *Showgirls* (1995) limits her ability to go deeply into the Gershon persona.

David Andrews responds to both Williams and to an earlier published essay by Martin. Much to his credit, Andrews managed to digest Williams's work just before his own book was published. Concentrating on the many different forms of softcore—not just the erotic thriller, which in its direct-to-video mode has actually been in decline for some time—Andrews ambitiously traces the entire tradition of softcore from the early days of the sexploitation film. His cultural range is also impressive, treating American as well as European films. The result is extremely informed and useful, though at times a bit ponderous. Andrews's chapter entitled "The Disorderly Feminization of Classical Sexploitation" is a case in point. The chapter offers a welcome genealogy of softcore from the early work of directors like Just Jaecklin, whose 1974 *Emmanuelle* was the softcore answer to the 1972 *Deep Throat* as well as the great sexploitation directors of the 1970s (such as Radley Metzger, Joe Sarno, and Roberta Finday, all of whom would eventually shift to hardcore by the mid-70's). Yet the chapter's attempt to follow in the tradition of Eric Schaefer's excellent *Bold! Daring! Schocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films* (Duke University Press, 1999) overburdens the writing.

Andrews also offers a welcome—if also sometimes tortured—masculine perspective on the softcore tradition, discovering what he calls a "mild misandry" that accompanies its "female friendly mode" (11). For example, he writes, "this misandristic disposition has led to a pointedly postfeminist bundle of double standards: whereas softcore adopts a permissive stance *vis-à-vis* female adultery, same-sex contact,

masturbation, and rape fantasy, it places anticonsumerist restrictions on male adultery, same-sex contact, masturbation, and rape fantasy" (11). In other words, even though one might expect a genre that includes the Playboy Channel to simply display tits and ass, there has been an unrelenting "postfeminist feminization" even in this persistently masculine territory. "Permissive" and "anti-consumerist" are Andrews's terms for understanding the many contradictions of a genre that has accepted female desire within certain consumerist constructs. Misandry, Andrews notes, is not the same thing as feminism. He does show, however, how the rise of cable made it possible for a less sensation-seeking softcore product to thrive, especially when wedded to film noir conventions and marketed as a mixture of class and spice to what he calls a middlebrow and woman-friendly demographic. Andrews thus identifies what he calls a "postfeminist, middlebrow strategy" that offered a "spicy, feminized eroticism" aimed at upscale working women who could afford cable in the first place. Yet, while he is passionate about his arguments, Andrews, unlike Williams, seems to derive no accompanying fun from its liveliness, its cross-fertilizations, its sheer weirdness.

Nina Martin's book is much more conventionally academic than that of either Williams or Andrews. It confines itself to a fairly narrow range of mostly feminist film scholarship from the 1980s and as such might have offered a brisk, brief antidote to Williams's compendium. But in the end it is perhaps too exclusively devoted to understanding the erotic thriller from the academic, feminist Film Studies point of view and lacks the verve of Williams or the precision of Andrews. Martin's book also suffers from the fact that, although its publication date is 2007, it takes into account neither Williams's nor Andrews's earlier groundbreaking work.

Like Andrews, Martin concentrates on the low-budget end of the continuum, or what Linda Ruth Williams would call the "shagpile carpet." But unlike Andrews, who takes on the whole gamut of softcore, including its complex history, she limits herself to the low-budget softcore erotic thriller alone. Martin's book follows in the tradition of feminist genre criticism. She traces the development of more overtly sexualized narratives of the sexually enthralled heroine made vulnerable to murder and she is good on the gaslight genre tradition's dynamics between sexual pleasure and danger. Like her predecessors, she finds telling contrasts between similarly plotted films; in each case it is the low-budget thriller that offers the greater female autonomy. Martin notes, for example, that the femme fatale of the erotic thriller can now go "unpunished for her active sexual desires" (93), while the male characters' infidelities are often punished by death. This is what Andrews, always ready with a term, had already called the misandry of the form. It would have been fruitful to see how Martin might have engaged with his arguments.

None of these writers labels the softcore thriller an outright example of feminism, though all deploy feminist criticism and Williams and Martin flirt with the genre from the perspective of "postfeminism." Williams, for example, offers a telling comparison of Demi Moore's role as Diane in *Indecent Proposal* (1993) to Julianne in the direct-to-video *Secret Games* (1992)—both films in which women sell themselves to men—though she finds the latter film to grant the woman who sells greater autonomy and solidarity with other women.

Just as critics of the 1980s, such as Tania Modleski, Bobby Allen, and Ien Ang, discovered the importance of the romance novel and the soap opera and made arguments for their importance to women's lives, so here we encounter another tradition of home viewing, though one no longer exclusively aimed at women. Williams, Andrews, and Martin illuminate a genre that frequently borrows from the traditions of the romance and the soap and which is primarily disseminated in the home, but which also links up with the traditions of noir and the thriller to create a potent hybrid. Just what this hybrid adds up to is very much up for grabs. One thing these critics agree upon is that softcore cannot be dismissed.

Sex movies of all sorts have always elicited more hysteria than level-headed analysis. What is perhaps most striking about softcore is how swiftly it gained an ascendancy that has not been much noted either by hysterics or scholars. So while it is certainly true that softcore has been cheated of respect by popular mainstream critics, and while it is also true that softcore does not even get much respect from its remarkably self-deprecating fans—at least compared to hardcore overt enthusiasts who attend AVN and GAYVN awards ceremonies—the injustice is pervasive across the broader field of sex movies. After all, this "field" really only amounts to a little weedy garden patch with a few part-time farmers and no larger recognition in the world of film preservation, archives, curating, film history, textbooks, and film retrospectives. It is to the credit of all three of these authors that they till their field with such care and attention.

LINDA WILLIAMS teaches in Film Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley.

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CULTURAL POLITICS

CHARLES MUSSER

Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity by Jacqueline Najuma Stewart

Jacqueline Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies* is a major contribution not only to Film Studies, but the fields of African American Studies and cultural history as well. In each of these areas, she takes the state of the questions to a new level. With rigor, insight, and eloquence, Stewart approaches a number of important topics including the nature of American cinema before 1920, the formation of African American film culture, and the impact on everyday experience of the Great Migration of Southern blacks to the North in the period through World War I. *Migrating to the Movies* looks at the intersection of the rise of the movies that culminated in the classical Hollywood cinema and the movement of African Americans into urban centers, where they encountered new modes of work, new opportunities for leisure, and new forms of racial oppression. Chicago is Stewart's principal geographic focus, and an appropriate one given the extent to which pre-1920 African American film culture flourished in that city (why it migrated eastward, particularly to New York, is another matter and beyond the scope and time frame of Stewart's study). By using this large-scale migration as a foundation for subsequently analyzing the articulations of race in cinema and the way African Americans experienced it, she resituates her African American subjects, seeing them as active, mobilized in search of new opportunities and new ways of life, rather than largely passive victims of a set of racial stereotypes that seem to be the starting point for much work in this area.

Migrating to the Movies is organized into three sections. The first looks at what Ida B. Wells saw as the misrepresentation of "a helpless race" and focuses on early depictions of blacks in American films—mostly Edison and Biograph films. In this regard, Stewart's thorough research has greatly expanded the number of films that now merit our consideration. Stewart moves beyond a limited and too-familiar group of pre-1909 films (in particular), which have been the focus of previous scholars (including myself). These new items include occasional depictions of black resistance (Biograph's *A Bucket of Cream Ale*, 1904) and a significant group of switched baby films such as *Mixed Babies* (Biograph, 1908), certainly a very early instance of different actors playing the same "character" (in the concluding scene an African American woman replaces a white actor in blackface). Stewart also tries to make sense of the increasing presence of white actors in blackface instead of black performers despite an emergent verisimilitude. For instance, since motion picture companies did not hire African Americans for their stock companies of actors after 1909, this encouraged the use of blackface. Moreover, to use black actors in important roles would have challenged the de facto segregation of these groups. Needless to say there were exceptions and contradictions to these tendencies —as well as the somewhat disconcerting simultaneous combination of both performative modes. My own reading is that the syncretic combination of different mimetic methods was routine in pre-1909 cinema, indeed was one of its characteristic features, and continued in residual form into the 1920s (in theater as well as film).

Some films that scholars have previously referenced in passing as examples of negative racial stereotypes, Stewart examines with greater depth and perspicacity. This is particularly true for the short Biograph film *A Nigger in a Woodpile* (1904), which she explores both as an idiom in its own right and as a film. She concludes with the provocative suggestion that race can be said to be the "nigger in the wood pile" of American cinema—certainly an assessment well worth pondering. Stewart's account of these films as revealing white "anxieties about what to do with a 'colored' population in motion"—as blacks move north and into American cities—is stimulating. It is also suggestive of some new terrain. For while there was a black migration to the northern cities, there was also a commensurate white migration with D. W. Griffith, Woodrow Wilson, and Thomas Dixon serving as illustrious examples. And W. K. L. Dixon, while less known, had ties to Virginia and probably should be added to this group. So should Sigmund Lubin, who was a peddler in the South, before moving to Philadelphia. On the other hand, there were still remnants of a pro-union Civil War formation: the Civil War was only forty years away in 1905—as close to those people's lives as the Vietnam War is to ours. Edwin S. Porter was, I would argue, a leading representative of this old formation. After all he changed his first name from Edward to Edwin and took the middle name of Stanton—to evoke Lincoln's Secretary of War (Edwin M. Stanton). Many members of Porter's family went to war and some died in the fight to end slavery in the United States. One would not want to argue that Porter was a model of enlightenment, but he probably would echo the proud assertion by Oscar Micheaux's Dr. Vivian that blacks "were never immigrants" and were part of the nation's traditional patrimony. In this respect, Stewart provides an interesting piece of information that was new to me. She indicates that black vaudevillian Tom Fletcher acted in some of Porter's films and also helped to hire African

Americans for Edison productions as well. However tenuously, Porter was working with professional black performers. (Likewise, in the 1880s and 1890s Thomas A. Edison employed African American inventor Lewis Howard Latimer.) Fletcher, of course, also appeared in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1925). Even a film such as Porter's *The Watermelon Patch* (1905), in which Fletcher appeared and of which he did not seemingly disapprove, is different from Biograph's *The Chicken Thief* (1904) in important ways. Probably not a burlesque of the genre and of African American stereotypes—one could certainly argue for the film along those lines. Likewise, while I find Stewart's reading of Porter's *Laughing Gas* (1907) enriching, I also find that to read the film against similar film subjects of the period, such as *The Fatal Sneeze* (Hepworth, 1907), provides a needed framework for interpretation that might complicate some of her assessments.

Stewart's book endlessly provokes and often inspires the reader to pursue some of her analyses into new areas. Stewart focuses on Edison and Biograph films, logically enough because they survive and because those of us writing before her had left so much unexamined. Nonetheless, how can we forget that there were three prominent Chicago-based, white-run film companies active before the time of black filmmaking pioneer William Foster—those headed respectively by Edward H. Amet and William Selig as well as the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company (owned by George Spoor and G. M. Anderson)? Were there any interactions (positive or negative) between these filmmakers and Chicago's burgeoning black population? Unfortunately these figures go virtually unmentioned. Stewart also avoids dealing with the various versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, including the 1914 feature film starring Sam Lucas, and she largely ignores *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). While these choices were probably wise and enabled her to focus on new areas of concern and provide fresh perspectives, the Lucas film still has not been adequately integrated into our understanding of African American film culture and racial representations before 1920. Some greater discussion of these films would have further illuminated some of the tensions between discourses examined in *Migrating to the Movies*.

The second section of *Migrating to the Movies* focuses on black moviegoing and leisure. Stewart sees black moviegoing as an important contribution to a black public sphere linked to modernity. In this respect, she makes use of some of the important work of her mentor, Miriam Hansen. On one hand, moviegoing was one of the new forms of leisure that African Americans could experience as they moved north. It signaled new opportunities and also in some respects a new degree of equality. On the other hand, many of the representations of blacks that they encountered, particularly before the rise of African American filmmaking, were demeaning. Stewart teases out these contradictions as well as the contradictory response to the movies from within the black community. She is eager to consider a range of possible viewing positions for black spectators, suggesting that Manthia Diawara's emphasis on resistance is too narrow. Situating moviegoing within broader patterns of leisure, she considers the place of moviegoing on Chicago's State Street (aka The Stroll). The texture of this work is very rich, illuminating the ways in which white owners often primarily or exclusively hired black employees to foster good relations with the community. Surprisingly, to me at least, only a couple of Chicago theaters on The Stroll could boast black ownership. Such a paucity is revealing. All the more so when Stewart explains that these too few owners had made their money first in gambling and other illegal activities. Here again, Stewart's study raises further questions. What was the relationship between those State Street nickelodeons that possessed a largely black clientele and those which had a primarily white clientele (Carl Laemmle saw his first film in a nickelodeon at State and Polk streets). Did the owners of these race theaters also own theaters that catered to largely white audiences? Perhaps some of these theaters even catered to mixed race audiences.

Stewart's final section (consisting of two chapters) is on black filmmaking in Chicago. The penultimate chapter examines the activities of Chicago-based William Foster and other local filmmakers such as Luther J. Pollard of the Ebony Film Corporation, as well as Noble and George P. Johnson of the Los Angeles-based Lincoln Motion Picture Company. Stewart elegantly details the work and activities of both Foster and Pollard. This section made me wonder about the ties between these filmmakers and such Chicago-based comedians as Essanay's Ben Turpin. Stewart enables us to understand the complicated relationship that African American filmmakers had with Chicago's South Side black community, but the real if no doubt problematic relationship which they possessed with the larger Chicago film community must await further research. It is worth noting that as Selig, Essanay, and Lubin lost their prominence, black filmmaking in Chicago and Philadelphia came to the fore.

Stewart's final chapter on Oscar Micheaux, who began his filmmaking career in Chicago, also offers some fine insights. She points out that the marriage between Dr. Vivian (Charles Lucas) and Sylvia Landry (Evelyn Preer) in *Within Our Gates* (1920) is the marriage between the black North and the black South—echoing the marriage between the white South and the white North in *The Birth of a Nation*. Likewise she astutely relates the preoccupations of his early

films to the Great Migration of blacks to the North in the first two decades of the twentieth century (and to another migration—that of blacks to the West). At the same time, Stewart glosses over a crucial aspect of Micheaux's silent films, which has to do with their intertexuality and indeed what Arthur Jafa, Clyde Taylor, and others have seen as Micheaux's black aesthetic. While she considers Corey Creekmur's conclusion that some of *Within Our Gates* is appropriating and reworking Charles Chestnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), she misses another borrowing that I have more briefly pointed out—that it also appropriates a key chapter in Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* (1879)—in which an event is retold several times, its substance changing in much the same way as the retold event in Micheaux's film. Griffith, of course, evokes Tourgee in *The Birth of a Nation*, so this reiteration here is pointed. Micheaux's samplings and engagements of texts does not stop here—his distaste for DuBois and his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) is deeply etched in this film as well. Perhaps this is to say that Stewart offers us a sociocultural reading of Micheaux and race cinema more than an aesthetic-cultural one. This is needed and all to the good, but if one is to avoid giving credence to the kind of insulting denigration of Micheaux's work that Philip Lopate displayed in the *New York Times* Sunday Book Review (August 5, 2007)—in a rather condescending review of Patrick McGilligan's Oscar Micheaux biography—we need to be clear as to the nature of his remarkable artistic achievements. For me, Micheaux remains the most important—and one of the most accomplished—American filmmakers of the 1920s. *Migrating to the Movies* has certainly provided a new and important framework for viewing his work. © 2008 Charles Musser

CHARLES MUSSER teaches Film Studies at Yale University.

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MATTHEW H. BERNSTEIN

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Anthony Slide provides a thoroughly researched, insightful look at the film career of Thomas Dixon, infamous for writing the two novels—*The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905)—on which D.W. Griffith based his epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The last major book on Dixon, Raymond Allen Cook's admiring *Fire from the Flint*, dates from 1958, so any fresh reassessment forty-six years later is welcome. *American Racist* argues that racist and sexist as he was—a believer in racial purity, obsessed with miscegenation and the idea of "black brutes" raping white women—Dixon was a product of his time, someone who "did nothing more than reiterate the comments of others" (4). Moreover, Slide argues that Dixon was a more expansive thinker than his Southern white supremacist views suggests. He also wrote against capital punishment; supported women's suffrage (and authored a World War I novel in which a secret league of women rescue an unprepared America from a German takeover); and advocated tolerance for Native Americans and Jews. As this last position suggests, Dixon, perhaps most surprisingly, derogated as "marauders" (16) the twentieth-century version of the Ku Klux Klan, whose 1915 revival *The Birth of a Nation* encouraged.

Slide's first chapter provides a concise career overview of Dixon's life and careers in search of influencing the largest possible audience—actor, lawyer, popular lecturer, and minister—until he began writing fiction in the early twentieth century. Dixon admired the writings of Henryk Sienkiewewicz (*Quo Vadis?*) and Hall Caine (whose *The Manxman* Hitchcock adapted in 1929). He despised Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and began writing fiction to counter Stowe's work. Yet Slide points out that Dixon was devoted not to the Confederate cause itself (27), but to the idea of "reconciliation and reunion" between the white North and South. For Dixon, the integration of blacks and whites was impossible in America; instead, African Americans could and should thrive, he believed, if they were shipped to Africa (accordingly he approved of Marcus Garvey and disdained W.E.B. DuBois).

Slide provides one chapter on Dixon's Reconstruction trilogy (rounded out by 1907's *The Traitor*), another on Dixon's play adaptations of the same, and yet another on Griffith's film. Slide is thereby able to show us how Dixon reworked certain story situations from novel to play, and how he provided much of the storyline for *The Birth of a Nation*, but not all of it (most notably, Griffith created the pre-Civil War scenes for the film). One of the most interesting details Slide unearths is the existence of an eloquent pamphlet published and distributed against the film by African American scholar Kelly Miller of Howard University (63–64).

Slide also makes it clear that Griffith's artistry as a storyteller far exceeded that of Dixon, an awkward, overly preachy, sensationalistic writer at best, one given to rape scenes he felt would titillate his female readers (not unlike Edith M. Hull's novel *The Sheik*, the basis of Valentino's 1925 star vehicle). Dixon was also fond of hasty climatic endings that failed to tie many story threads. Still, Dixon's novels often won critical plaudits.

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Indeed, Dixon wrote eighteen novels between 1903 and 1939—though as Slide notes, he did so in part via an obvious "mastery of self-plagiarism" (6). Moreover, Dixon continued to work, in various capacities, on seventeen more films after *The Birth of a Nation*. Buoyed by the success of Griffith's film, Dixon in 1916 created his own production company, to which he transferred the rights to his published novels. When his efforts as screenwriter/producer/director sputtered, Dixon wrote scripts for other studios (such as Fox) and for Buck Jones Westerns during the 1920s. Dixon's last cinematic project (a B-picture for an obscure independent producer) condemned the modern Ku Klux Klan, and was based on a storyline Dixon contrived from his 1924 novel *The Black Hood*, itself a rewrite of *The Traitor*. Dixon could never equal the success of *The Birth of a Nation*, however, or the novels on which it was based. Not that he didn't try: he conceived his last novel, 1939's *The Flaming Sword*, as a sequel to the Reconstruction novels: its protagonist is the Little Colonel's daughter.

Slide provides concise synopses of all of Dixon's novels, plays, and films, the last carefully reconstructed from reviews when the films do not survive (he has consulted many archival resources and the trade press to construct his account). The result is a far fuller portrait of Dixon's ideas and writing than has circulated in Film Studies till now, and one written in an engaging and enlightening style. As a preacher, Dixon was "equivalent to today's televangelists, but with an honesty and integrity unknown to the latter" (21). Slide also injects humor into his account at various points: there is Elsie Stoneman's banjo-playing at the Union hospital in *The Clansman*, "the delights of which the reader can scarcely imagine" (38). In commenting on Dixon's theft of Elsie's dialogue from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days and Collect*, Slide speculates that "the gay poet would have approved his reincarnation in drag" (76). Lydia Brown in the same film is "the Civil War version of Theda Bara as seen if not in blackface, at least in passing-for-white-face" (146).

Slide concludes *American Racist* by charting the later history of *The Birth of a Nation* from its sound reissue (and the Production Code Administration's assessment of it) through the film's much-debated addition to the National Film Registry and the Director's Guild of America's decision to retire the D. W. Griffith Award. Slide further provides a synoptic distribution history of the film since 1915, concluding with the copyright squabbles (initiated by collector/distributor Raymond Rohauer) surrounding Griffith's epic in recent decades.

American Racist corroborates Slide's contention that seeing Dixon as a social thinker will add new dimensions to our understanding of *The Birth of a Nation*. But in tracing out Dixon's filmmaking career, Slide explores many little-known byways of American film history which are of interest in and of themselves. Slide has long had a reputation as one of the most productive and knowledgeable film historians outside the academy. *American Racist*, with its authoritative research and incisive commentary, will only affirm that standing. © 2008 Matthew H. Bernstein

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PAUL THOMAS

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The history of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is beset with ironies. To begin with, as Daniel Leab points out in this invaluable book, 1944, when left-wing Russophilia was at its height, may have been "the most inappropriate moment possible to try to publish a thinly-camouflaged attack on Stalin and the Soviet Union" (3). Even so, Orwell succeeded: after the customary round of rejections Secker and Warburg published it in the U.K., and Harcourt, Brace snapped it up (as did the Book-of-the-Month Club) in the U.S. It sold more than 450,000 copies between 1946–49. Nor do the ironies end here. If "the genesis of *Animal Farm* lay in [Orwell's] desire 'on my return from Spain' to expose 'the Soviet myth in a story that could easily be understood by anyone,'" it was not so understood by operatives of the "intelligence community"—in reality a shifting alphabet soup of agencies on both sides of the Atlantic bent upon concealment of information as much as its dissemination. ("The information I requested from the CIA," says Leab, a skilled archival sleuth, "might just as well have gone down Orwell's 'memory hole'" [xiv].) These agencies by the early 1950s—when the idea of a cartoon version of *Animal Farm* was first bruited—had their own rows to hoe, and this is where Leab's ably researched account comes in.

Just as Frederic Warburg was to claim that *Animal Farm* "made me as a publisher," so Joy Batchelor (who, with John Halas, made the 1954 animated version) claimed that it "made history, and it made us" (128). Not only was it far and away the best-known Halas–Batchelor production; *Animal Farm* was also "a first in film history . . . the first cartoon

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feature to be made in the United Kingdom for commercial distribution, and the first feature-length cartoon that dealt with a serious subject" (58). Prior to its release, only twenty-four animated features had ever been completed, and Walt Disney had made most of these. Halas and Batchelor, however, had "consciously not imitated Disney" (112). The British media, which "gloated over the choice of a UK firm . . . promoted the story remorselessly, parroting press releases about how a relatively obscure couple had been chosen over more famous animators, such as . . . Disney" (54). Batchelor became (to the *West Herts Post*—Leab has done his homework) "The Watford Girl Who Won Fame As The British Disney" (115).

But home-grown did not mean autonomous. Not only did the CIA finance *Animal Farm*, as had long been rumored; Leab shows that the Agency was also intimately involved with its production. The CIA's identity as "the investor" was more easily concealed behind a confected production company, RD-DR, by having *Animal Farm* put together by a husband-and-wife team in Stroud, Gloucestershire; the film (despite constant, irksome and expensive changes dictated by "the investor") came in at a fraction of U.S. production costs. The British headline, "It's British—and No Pig in a Poke" was both more wrong and more right than its writer could have known; the funding wasn't British, the film a bargain.

Leab is good at delineating the "laborious, often tedious job" of animating *Animal Farm*, and at tracing out the source of the influences that were brought to bear on Halas and Batchelor, who were "pressured relentlessly to inject a particular political message into their production" (71). This message owed nothing whatsoever to Orwell. Louis de Rochemont, an erstwhile MGM producer who had supported and actively enforced the Hollywood blacklist, and who enjoyed a "close rapport with J. Edgar Hoover" (34) joined forces with the *Reader's Digest* (the plot thickens) to form RD-DR. As Leab establishes—having accessed Rochemont's records—"nothing better illustrates the impact of de Rochemont's 'investors' than the difference between the book and the film" versions of *Animal Farm* (73).

There was concern lest Snowball, the Trotsky figure among the animals, be portrayed "too sympathetically"; he duly became an "impractical visionary," "domineering" and "officious" into the bargain (79). Again, one John Stuart Martin, "part of the Princeton-Time, Inc. nexus [the plot thickens again—I wish Leab had told us more about this 'Princeton-Time, Inc. nexus'] so much involved with the making" of *Animal Farm* "was not interested in Orwell's theme of united animals building Animal Farm as an enterprise but in the pig-dictator [Napoleon's] brutal seizure of power." Above all, there was the ending—which, as written, "failed to point out the similarities between socialism and totalitarianism" (80), similarities Orwell had in fact (and for the record) been at pains to *deny*. "Almost nobody involved . . . gave much consideration to remaining faithful to Orwell's bleak conclusion" (88). Halas spoke of the "conventional need to have an upbeat, active ending that sent audiences away happy," an ending which, in the event, "centered on images of 'rollback' and 'liberation'" (85–6), these being CIA staples (until 1956). But who then was to do the liberating? Not "farmhands." Any uprising on *their* part would be "an endorsement of anarchism" (80); besides, "the investors did not wish to antagonize legislators, lobbyists or publicists involved with American agriculture" (76). In this Grand Guignol it was to be animal liberation all the way.

Yet neither the blatantly tacked-on Hollywood ending of joyous animals on the rise, nor yet Delmore Schwartz's absurd praise for the film's "literal fidelity" (112) to the book, redeemed *Animal Farm*, even commercially. Cold War themes in general were box-office poison, as was the animated *Animal Farm* until it found a home in U.S. high schools' curricula—a fitting home for what had become "simplistic Cold War persiflage dumbed down to grade school level" (101). Let those take comfort who can. © 2008 Paul Thomas

PAUL THOMAS teaches Political Theory and American Cultures at the University of California, Berkeley.

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HORROR

RICHARD JOHN ASCARATE

Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear After 1945, ed. Steffen Hantke

Ask any scholar or aficionado of German horror cinema to name a few of the genre's exemplars and you'll likely hear a familiar list of Wilhelmine and Weimar classics: *The Student of Prague* (Stellan Rye, 1913; Henrik Galeen, 1926), *The Golem* (Paul Wegener, 1920), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919), *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922), and *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931). True disciples may even recall *The Hands of Orlac* (Wiene, 1924). So entrenched have such titles become in film histories, course syllabi, and collective memory—thanks in part to Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari*

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Yet neither the blatantly tacked-on Hollywood ending of joyous animals on the rise, nor yet Delmore Schwartz's absurd praise for the film's "literal fidelity" (112) to the book, redeemed *Animal Farm*, even commercially. Cold War themes in general were box-office poison, as was the animated *Animal Farm* until it found a home in U.S. high schools' curricula—a fitting home for what had become "simplistic Cold War persiflage dumbed down to grade school level" (101). Let those take comfort who can. © 2008 Paul Thomas

PAUL THOMAS teaches Political Theory and American Cultures at the University of California, Berkeley.

BOOK DATA Daniel Leab, *Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of "Animal Farm."* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. $55.00 cloth. 196 pages.

HORROR

RICHARD JOHN ASCARATE

Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear After 1945, ed. Steffen Hantke

Ask any scholar or aficionado of German horror cinema to name a few of the genre's exemplars and you'll likely hear a familiar list of Wilhelmine and Weimar classics: *The Student of Prague* (Stellan Rye, 1913; Henrik Galeen, 1926), *The Golem* (Paul Wegener, 1920), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919), *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922), and *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931). True disciples may even recall *The Hands of Orlac* (Wiene, 1924). So entrenched have such titles become in film histories, course syllabi, and collective memory—thanks in part to Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari*

to Hitler (1946) and Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1969)—that few others may come to mind. After all, Hitler rose to power in 1933 and hadn't much use for a *cinema* of fear. The horror show simply slid from the movie screen and diffused throughout Europe and beyond. Twelve years later, their thousand-year Reich in a heap, shell-shocked Germans were too busy gathering up the physical and spiritual rubble to bother with visual tales of vampires, child killers, and somnambulists. Not until 1979, with Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom of the Night* (a classic, but still a remake), did the horror film seem to return to Germany. Then, more years of indifference.

Enter Steffen Hantke and the dozen able contributors to *Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear After 1945*, who successfully argue that German horror cinema did not perish in 1933 but remains alive (undead?) and well, having much more to say about German national identity, gender politics, and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the Nazi past), among other perennial concerns, than film scholars have noticed or appreciated. In an introductory essay, Hantke (an associate professor of English, no less, at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea, which—more than recent hand-wringing self-analyses of the dwindling profession—bespeaks the need for those wishing to make a mark in German Studies to diversify their cultural scope) lays out the task at hand and the attendant difficulties. He suggests that historians of post-war German cinema are not "susceptible to the presence of horror films because they tend to devalue genre in favor of a more radically idiosyncratic and personal auteurist filmmaking," having used a "basic model of genericity . . . derived from the American film industry" (xvi). The result: film scholars and their acolytes have overlooked what they believed did not exist. The essays in this volume should open their eyes.

Films examined range from Peter Lorre's *The Lost One* (1951) to Christoph Schlingensief's *The German Chainsaw Massacre* (1990). Each essay offers an original reading (the abundance of Web-based citations throughout betrays institutional literati's shameful neglect of the genre) of an entire film, a scene or device therein, or a director's *oeuvre*. For example, Eugenie Brinkema analyzes the silences and visual separations of speaker from utterance in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997). She also expounds learnedly upon why Haneke's is a "horrible," rather than a "horror," film. Richard Hand sees in Ulli Lommel's *The Tenderness of Wolves* (1973)—a post-World War II retelling of the cannibalistic spree (1919–24) of German serial killer Fritz Haarmann—a metaphor for the heartless materialism of the German *Wirtschaftswunder* ("economic miracle") of the 1950s, as well as a "film about film and the self-referential" (87). And Mikel Koven and Patricia MacCormack plumb the depths of some of the most gruesome scenes in Jörg Buttgereit's shock cinema. In *NekRomantik 2* (1991), for instance, a young woman (Monika M.) makes love on screen to a semi-viscous corpse that she has exhumed and brought to her apartment. When decomposition threatens to spoil their relationship, she saws off the cadaver's head and genitalia and preserves them. Frolicking with her living and extremely naïve boyfriend (Mark Reeder), who finds the detached male organ in Monika's refrigerator but returns to give her a chance to explain, she waits for him to reach the height of passion before she—again, on-screen—decapitates him with a butcher knife, replacing his head with that of her embalmed lover. In a perverse take on pornography's "money shot," she shudders in rapture amid a spray of gore. (This is not *Papas Kino*.) Although such scenes outraged contemporary audiences, causing some countries to ban the *NekRomantik* films, MacCormack builds a plausible case for seeing the second installment as a challenge to "traditional classifications of 'normal' sexuality, gender placement and subject valuation" (212).

Generally well-argued, always innovative, the volume bears some minor flaws. Brinkema's fine argument often gasps for breath beneath a Freudian-Deleuzean-Lacanian exoskeleton, and the author's academic prose can read like Yoda channeling a lit-crit theorist. (What is the harried film scholar, the bleary-eyed grad student, to make of sentences such as: "These defenses—and the more vocal they are, the more they do precisely this—effect little more than securing the entity 'horror films' against intrusion by ways of imagining that very field otherwise" [148]?) Further, Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Anatomy* (2000) and *Anatomy 2* (2003) are mentioned only in passing. This is unfortunate. The films deal with topics germane to the collection: medical ethics, Nazi human experimentation, female victimization. *Anatomy* also features replicas of the controversial plastinated works of German pathologist and artist Gunther von Hagens. Analysis of these props alone would have allowed cross-references to a cultural phenomenon more popular, so far, than any German horror film (as evidenced by two heavily attended exhibitions of plastinated human specimens currently touring the U.S.: *Our Body: The Universe Within* and *Bodies: The Exhibition*).

Finally, the volume lacks the overarching, unified perspective of Kracauer's or Eisner's works, of Anton Kaes's *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of Film as History* (1989). But not every reader will find this detrimental. Quibbling aside, the contributors have made a real, thought-provoking intervention in German film scholarship. Given that many of the

films discussed have recently emerged from underground obscurity to commercial DVD respectability (with director commentaries, actor interviews, and deleted scenes), *Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear After 1945* should serve as main text to new courses on a long overlooked and underappreciated film genre. © 2008 Richard John Ascarate

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BOOK DATA Steffen Hantke (ed.), *Caligari's Heirs: The German Cinema of Fear After 1945*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007. $35.00 paper. 272 pages.

HEATHER HENDERSHOT

The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Horror, ed. Ian Conrich and David Woods

Only one image in Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's *Grindhouse* (2007) really endures in my memory: leathery old Kurt Russell sitting at a bar slurping down a plate of nachos. He is a "macho slob," as Robert Shail (citing Susan Jeffords) describes him in *The Cinema of John Carpenter* (113). Later we learn that he is also a murderous psychopath, but for now our sympathy is with him. The moment is crafted for cinephiles who gravitate less to art films than to low-rent genre pictures, and it is Russell's genre films with low-rent auteur John Carpenter that have earned him cult status and a reputation as a competent tough-guy actor. Like Russell, Carpenter is not, it seems, Academy Award material. And though Carpenter has made some twenty films and has a huge fan base, little scholarly attention has been paid to him. Most often, he is simply dismissed as a reactionary. Ian Conrich and David Woods aim to correct the situation.

Robin Wood famously argued that the classic horror films of the 1930s and the neo-classics of the 1970s were progressive for their critique of normativity; the roots of monstrosity came not from Mars (or Russia) but from the patriarchal family. Films offering only supernatural evil, without social critique, were reactionary; slasher movies were the ultimate in reactionary horror, and Carpenter had started the cycle with *Halloween* (1978). This book deemphasizes the reactionary vs. progressive dyad, and Carpenter emerges as a director whose work cannot be boiled down to a single political intonation. Barry Keith Grant concludes that, "At best we could say that Carpenter's *oeuvre* is deeply ambivalent, his work constituting what Robin Wood might more generously call a series of 'incoherent texts'—works in which a failure 'toward the ordering of experience' exposes dominant ideology" (18).

Continuing the theme of ambivalence, a number of contributors note that Carpenter often sets up politically interesting scenarios—a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles landscape where police massacre gang members in *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), a world ruled by greedy, brainwashing, alien bastards in *They Live* (1988)—only to resort to shoot-'em-up finales rather than resolving issues the films have raised. But Steve Smith counters that "Carpenter's professed preference for movies as escapist entertainment … has at least the merit of not quite letting us forget what we are escaping from" (47). If Carpenter does not offer up a radical solution for the dystopian world of *They Live*, at least the film is a *cri de coeur* against Reagan's trickle-down economics.

Tony Williams, though, is loath to concede the uneven merits of Carpenter's films, contending that they are severely limited by their nihilism and their inability to imagine "the other" in terms that are not ultimately disparaging. I agree about the troubling nature of Carpenter's nihilism, though I'm not sure that the failure to offer cogent solutions to social problems in action-horror films is a right-wing maneuver. The progressive 1970s films—*It's Alive* (1974), *Last House on the Left* (1972)—don't exactly offer clear solutions either, though they do lay out social conflicts more coherently than Carpenter's films do.

Most essays in this volume rely on close textual reading bolstered by critical theory. Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz make a compelling argument about Carpenter's stance towards the repetitive nature of mass culture. This is one of the best essays in the book, but also frustrating because the authors clearly had much more to say but were constrained by having only ten pages to say it in. Indeed, the whole volume is limited by the fact that the essays are all so very short. Conrich stands out for his rigorously researched examination of fans of *The Thing* (1982) and *Halloween*. A few essays drawing on psychoanalytic theory, however, fall flat. Marie Mulvey-Roberts contends that a character pulled through a hole in a wall in *Prince of Darkness* (1987) is metaphorically exiting the womb; David Cronenberg might have covered our hero with afterbirth, but Carpenter keeps him dusty and dry and simply avoids the metaphor altogether. Suzie Young is similarly unconvincing in offering a Lacanian take on *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), though one cannot help but agree with her claim that, "Carpenter's discontent with civilization remains a masculinist dream for nurturing mothers and gentle-hearted muses, rather than a feminist scrutiny of patriarchy" (137).

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David Burnand and Miguel Mera offer a terrific technical analysis of Carpenter's music, concluding that, "The obvious features of Carpenter's scores are obsessive repetition, primitivism and minimalism, and an improvisational approach that works at the most basic level of musical communication" (65). However, to understand Carpenter's uniqueness it is also important to consider the economics of scoring. Today most action-adventure and horror scores sound like expertly designed mix tapes. Outside of *Christine* (1983), which absolutely demanded a 1950s score, Carpenter has assiduously avoided the high concept approach to filmmaking that demands an album tie-in.

The best essays in *The Cinema of John Carpenter* make the reader want to view the director's films again. But they don't all hold up. *In the Mouth of Madness* does *sound* fascinating and post modern, a poor man's *Mullholland Dr.* (2001), *avant la lettre*. Yet after a brilliant opening in a mental asylum—evocative of William Castle, with Sam Neill giving a Vincent Price performance—the film turns inexplicably boring. Carpenter has completed two projects since this book was published, both episodes in Showtime's *Masters of Horror*. *Pro-Life* (2006) centers on anti-abortion terrorists; the film has a progressive edge, yet no spirit. The more compelling *Cigarette Burns* (2005), conversely, contends that viewing horror films is a radically *personal* experience. Though the progressive vs. reactionary school might have us believe that good horror must address radically *social* experiences, Carpenter reveals that horror can be interesting even when it is not critical of dominant ideology. Sometimes slurping macho slobs are enough. © 2008 Heather Hendershot

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ADDRESS FOR REVIEW COPIES

Matthew H. Bernstein
Emory University, Film Studies Department
109 Rich Building
1602 Fishburne Drive
Atlanta GA 30322

THEORIES AND TOPICS

BERNARD F. DICK

Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business by David Mamet

Mamet has always been ambivalent. With him, it's the industry, *non*; film, *si*. In *Make-Believe Town* (Faber and Faber, 1996), he considers most movies trash. He was equally outspoken in *On Directing Film* (Viking, 1991), based on a series of lectures he gave at Columbia University in 1987, in which he dismissed film and drama schools as a waste of time and warned students they might become as superficial as the Hollywood product if they sell their souls to the industry.

Mamet's latest broadside against Hollywood, *Bambi vs. Godzilla*, is a continuation of his ongoing dialogue between Mamet the artist and the Hollywood hucksters, monopolists, and franchise-seekers with whom the artist must contend. He is especially critical of the producer, whom he compares to the driver of the getaway car for the gangster–artist, who has just robbed a bank (that is, broken into the vault of inspiration and waiting to convert the loot into art). Rather than wait for the artist, the producer sells the car at a profit.

The title, *Bambi vs. Godzilla*, is not immediately clear. It is tempting to imagine a naif on Skull Island (aka Hollywood), who ends up like Fay Wray in *King Kong* (1933), tied between two pillars and tormented to the point that either a rescue operation or a sacrifice to the dark gods is all that remains. But actually, the title derives from an animated short, *Bambi Meets Godzilla* (1969), in which the fawn loses out to one of Japan's best-known exports. Believing that less is more, Mamet sees Bambi as the epitome of Less; Godzilla, of More. In terms of acting, it's the difference between relying on understatement and subtlety (Less), and reveling in the high style (More)—for example, the undervalued Tony Curtis, as opposed to the overpraised Sir Laurence Olivier. In *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Curtis plays the character, the character in drag, and the character masquerading as a millionaire who sounds like Cary Grant. Curtis, Mamet argues, does not resort to flamboyance, but gets to the core of a character who takes on two roles, without identifying with either, while Olivier is all technique—dazzling but transparent. Mamet may have quirky taste, but many would agree with him about Olivier, a better stage than a film actor.

In terms of film, "Less" exists in the admittedly rare "perfect film" such as *The Lady Eve* (1941), which Mamet offers as the paradigm. Mamet breaks the narrative down into

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three acts: "Money" (a cardsharp sets her sights on a wealthy herpetologist, only to fall in love with him); "Revenge" (the herpetologist, learning of her past, rejects her; to win him back, the cardsharp masquerades as a titled Brit, tormenting him on their honeymoon with a catalog of ex-lovers and prompting him to seek a divorce); and "Reconciliation" (the cardsharp drops the pose, reverting to her old self and thus reclaiming the herpetologist, now more tolerant of a woman with a checkered past). If that isn't Aristotelian construction, what is? One should remember that Mamet began in the theater, where he learned the art of plotting. Even in his screenplays, he follows the classic situation-complication-resolution model; his adaptation of Terence Rattigan's play, *The Winslow Boy* (1999), which he also directed, follows the same narrative path: situation (a false accusation), complication (mixed public reaction), resolution (vindication). Mamet's other screenplays reveal the same kind of careful construction.

Mamet can be exasperating. His rants against Hollywood have become the equivalent of a leitmotif. He is still careless about details. In *On Directing Film*, he admits he cannot recall who has the band strike up the *Marseillaise* in *Casablanca* (1942) and drown out the German anthem. It is amazing that Mamet did not know that the character was Victor Laszlo, played by Paul Henreid, billed third after Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. What matters to Mamet is that the band leader first needs a nod from Rick (Humphrey Bogart). "That's great acting," Mamet exclaims (76). Perhaps, but director Michael Curtiz was only following the script: "[Rick] nods almost imperceptibly." Similarly, in *Bambi vs. Godzilla*, Mamet misidentifies the male lead in *New Orleans* (1947); the actor is not Robert Alda, but Arturo de Córdova; and the Susan Hayward biopic about capital punishment is not *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), but the far more harrowing *I Want to Live!* (1958). Mamet would probably dismiss these criticisms as petty cavils. But they suggest an indifference to detail that seems to be compatible with his way of writing. Mamet is Bambi reborn, the embodiment of Less, rejecting rhetoric, paring language to the bone, and making unfinished sentences self-contained utterances. He knows that while human discourse is often fragmentary, a good listener can fill in the ellipses. It is as if Mamet were saying that, while he may misidentify actors, forget names, or confuse titles, the reader should be able to correct the errors. What matters is the validity of the thesis. Aristotle in the *Poetics* argued that factual errors do not necessarily undermine a work's integrity. Yes, Mamet errs, but his critique of corporate Hollywood is sound. That's David Mamet: Bambi redidivus, battling the Hollywood behemoth. Somehow one suspects the beleaguered fawn will survive. © 2008 Bernard F. Dick

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MARTIN FRADLEY

Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema by Elisabeth Bronfen

Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960 by Judith E. Smith

Though they differ methodologically, these two books share a skeptical attitude to American ideals of family and domesticity. Elisabeth Bronfen's psychoanalytically oriented *Home in Hollywood* contains close readings of a small but diverse range of films, from classics such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940) through to *Batman Returns* (1992). The "home" of her title here refers less to a literal domestic sphere than to a whole national psychosocial realm of conflicted identities. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in a characteristically flamboyant endorsement, *Home in Hollywood* offers "the proper answer to the nationalist discourse of blood/and/soil!" The compensatory functions of Hollywood's mass-produced fantasies are at the epicenter of Bronfen's treatise: she argues that communal longings are continually underwritten in American popular cinema by "a knowledge of the uncanniness of existence [which] haunts all attempts at devising protective fictions that will allow us make sense of the contradictions and contingencies of our reality" (21). Bronfen finds in her case studies a reminder of the fundamental cultural and psychological impossibility of finding a home, and in turn she muses at length over the manner in which *The Wizard of Oz* articulates the prohibitive imperatives of the dominant culture: "Dorothy recognizes, for us all, that if we want to fulfil our desires, we must not look beyond our own backyard . . . We must instead deny the feeling of dissatisfaction that causes us to desire, that spurs us to go in search of desire" (69).

In thus dissecting the ideal of home as "a symbolic fiction that makes one's real living conditions bearable" (73), Bronfen historicizes her analysis by turning to *The Wizard of Oz*'s representation of key national mythologies of the post-war United States and the film's domestic rehabilitation on television in the 1940s and 50s. The totemic status *The Wizard of Oz* subsequently acquired was, according to Bronfen, precisely a palliative for collective unhappiness. The film became a

three acts: "Money" (a cardsharp sets her sights on a wealthy herpetologist, only to fall in love with him); "Revenge" (the herpetologist, learning of her past, rejects her; to win him back, the cardsharp masquerades as a titled Brit, tormenting him on their honeymoon with a catalog of ex-lovers and prompting him to seek a divorce); and "Reconciliation" (the cardsharp drops the pose, reverting to her old self and thus reclaiming the herpetologist, now more tolerant of a woman with a checkered past). If that isn't Aristotelian construction, what is? One should remember that Mamet began in the theater, where he learned the art of plotting. Even in his screenplays, he follows the classic situation-complication-resolution model; his adaptation of Terence Rattigan's play, *The Winslow Boy* (1999), which he also directed, follows the same narrative path: situation (a false accusation), complication (mixed public reaction), resolution (vindication). Mamet's other screenplays reveal the same kind of careful construction.

Mamet can be exasperating. His rants against Hollywood have become the equivalent of a leitmotif. He is still careless about details. In *On Directing Film*, he admits he cannot recall who has the band strike up the *Marseillaise* in *Casablanca* (1942) and drown out the German anthem. It is amazing that Mamet did not know that the character was Victor Laszlo, played by Paul Henreid, billed third after Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. What matters to Mamet is that the band leader first needs a nod from Rick (Humphrey Bogart). "That's great acting," Mamet exclaims (76). Perhaps, but director Michael Curtiz was only following the script: "[Rick] nods almost imperceptibly." Similarly, in *Bambi vs. Godzilla*, Mamet misidentifies the male lead in *New Orleans* (1947); the actor is not Robert Alda, but Arturo de Córdova; and the Susan Hayward biopic about capital punishment is not *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), but the far more harrowing *I Want to Live!* (1958). Mamet would probably dismiss these criticisms as petty cavils. But they suggest an indifference to detail that seems to be compatible with his way of writing. Mamet is Bambi reborn, the embodiment of Less, rejecting rhetoric, paring language to the bone, and making unfinished sentences self-contained utterances. He knows that while human discourse is often fragmentary, a good listener can fill in the ellipses. It is as if Mamet were saying that, while he may misidentify actors, forget names, or confuse titles, the reader should be able to correct the errors. What matters is the validity of the thesis. Aristotle in the *Poetics* argued that factual errors do not necessarily undermine a work's integrity. Yes, Mamet errs, but his critique of corporate Hollywood is sound. That's David Mamet: Bambi redidivus, battling the Hollywood behemoth. Somehow one suspects the beleaguered fawn will survive. © 2008 Bernard F. Dick

BERNARD F. DICK is the author of a biography of Claudette Colbert, *She Walked in Beauty* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

BOOK DATA David Mamet, *Bambi vs. Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business.* New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. $22.00 cloth. 272 pages.

MARTIN FRADLEY

Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema by Elisabeth Bronfen

Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960 by Judith E. Smith

Though they differ methodologically, these two books share a skeptical attitude to American ideals of family and domesticity. Elisabeth Bronfen's psychoanalytically oriented *Home in Hollywood* contains close readings of a small but diverse range of films, from classics such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940) through to *Batman Returns* (1992). The "home" of her title here refers less to a literal domestic sphere than to a whole national psychosocial realm of conflicted identities. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in a characteristically flamboyant endorsement, *Home in Hollywood* offers "the proper answer to the nationalist discourse of blood/and/soil!" The compensatory functions of Hollywood's mass-produced fantasies are at the epicenter of Bronfen's treatise: she argues that communal longings are continually underwritten in American popular cinema by "a knowledge of the uncanniness of existence [which] haunts all attempts at devising protective fictions that will allow us make sense of the contradictions and contingencies of our reality" (21). Bronfen finds in her case studies a reminder of the fundamental cultural and psychological impossibility of finding a home, and in turn she muses at length over the manner in which *The Wizard of Oz* articulates the prohibitive imperatives of the dominant culture: "Dorothy recognizes, for us all, that if we want to fulfil our desires, we must not look beyond our own backyard . . . We must instead deny the feeling of dissatisfaction that causes us to desire, that spurs us to go in search of desire" (69).

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reassuringly familiar fantasy space in which Americans could annually find the solace of a communal sense of belonging. Yet the audience was also necessarily presented with the fiction of that selfsame belief. In a devastated post-war world characterized by the trauma of cultural displacement and mass global migration, for many of the populace there really was no place like home to return to. The historical context arguably justifies Bronfen's psychoanalytic insistence on "the unremitting discontent that inhabits all human existence" (77), but at times the approach seems heavy-handed. It does not take much to get Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), with all its mirror imagery and fractured personalities, to yield to a psychoanalytic reading. And the same can be said of Bronfen's argument that Fritz Lang's *Secret Behind the Door* (1948) should be interpreted as a "cinematic homage to Freud's speculations on the death drive" (166).

At certain junctures, however, *Home in Hollywood* is very persuasive. The reading of *Rebecca* draws intriguing parallels between the melancholy of Hitchcock's dislocated heroine and the director's own self-imposed exile. Elsewhere, a sensitive and intelligent analysis of *Batman Returns* offers compelling returns to the reader in both its penetrating analysis of the film's proto-feminism and its mournful illustration of Bronfen's overarching thesis: that unhappiness, dislocation, and alienation are the sacrifices we all make for the sake of social belonging. For Bronfen, then, *Batman Returns* exposes the painful compromises demanded by society's ideological imperatives. It is in the compensatory "virtual home of cinema" (29) that we may find a refuge to which we compulsively retreat in order to inhabit the gratifying illusions of Hollywood's dreamscape.

Judith E. Smith's *Visions of Belonging* interrogates shifting conceptions of American citizenship in mid-twentieth-century popular culture. Emphasizing the manner in which national unity was continually figured in terms of family unity, Smith concludes her book with a prolonged discussion of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 Broadway hit *Raisin in the Sun*. Arguing that this play—the first ever on Broadway written by an African American woman and the first for fifty years to be directed by an African American—directly challenged "the white boundaries of everyman universality" (281), Smith compellingly claims that *Raisin* "dramatized African-American citizens as integral to the fabric of American life, their inclusion requisite to fulfilling the promise of postwar American democracy," the play simultaneously celebrating "the rich history of black resistance and the momentum of worldwide anticolonialism as contributing to the transformation of American life" (314–15). Yet *Visions of Belonging* is keenly alert to the dramatic and radically shifting political context of the period: despite Hansberry's impeccable liberal credentials, by the time of *Raisin*'s adaptation by Hollywood in 1961 critics on the radical Left would contemptuously dismiss her interracial cosmopolitanism as mere "glorified soap opera" (326).

Visions of Belonging traces the uneasy and contested terrain of American national identity in the post-war period immediately prior to the birth of identity politics, and there is certainly a tangible sense of post-nationalist nostalgia underpinning the volume. Having carefully analyzed how diverse was the cultural and critical reception of progressive works, Smith's concluding sentences strike a distinctly poignant note. The political landscape which her book covers, she argues, "reminds us of deep yearnings for cosmopolitan crossings, social kinship, and political interracial solidarity that must animate any hopes to realize the unfulfilled promise of meaningful social transformation and democratic inclusion" (327). Indeed, *Visions of Belonging*'s analysis of the popular-culture terrain during World War II and the early cold war years itself critically engages with the comfortingly nostalgic templates for "an expanded postwar citizenship and realigned heterosexual partnerships" (3). As Smith suggests, however, using the family as a universal metaphor for nation inevitably marginalized people who deviated from the norm. Thus, the progressive initiative to envision a multiracial democratic citizenship was perpetually entangled with the political conservatism of the era: the critique of race relations in Lillian Smith's interracial romance *Strange Fruit* (1944) was countered by the success of Cid Ricketts Sumner's pro-segregationist *Quality* (1946); the film adaptation of Arthur Miller's 1947 play *All My Sons* found its politics muted by an industry fearful of HUAC's investigative gaze; and Elia Kazan's adaptation of *Pinky* in 1949—"the year," according to a breathless *Variety*, "of the negro problem pic"—attracted criticism on the Left for its "elisions and evasions" (197), but nevertheless prompted calls for censorship in enraged Southern states. Highly readable and sensitively written, *Visions of Belonging* demonstrates both the ambitions and the limitations of post-war liberalism; like *Home in Hollywood*, it is infused with a symptomatic combination of hopefulness and melancholy in its consideration of collective longings for optimistically imagined communities. © 2008 Martin Fradley

MARTIN FRADLEY teaches at the University of Manchester, U.K.

BOOK DATA Elisabeth Bronfen, *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. $71.00 cloth; $27.50 paper. 352 pages.

Judith E. Smith, *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. $73.00 cloth; $25.00 paper. 480 pages.

KRISTI MCKIM

Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility by Rey Chow

In her new volume, Rey Chow claims that contemporary Chinese films inspire an "intellectual renewal and regeneration" through an "affective mode" she terms the "sentimental" (14). Historicizing the idea in relation to Friedrich Schiller, she claims that sentimentality allows us to glimpse diasporic Chinese communities' ideals and interiorities. Chow also proposes that the idea can tell us something about cinema itself. She asks: "is there something about film as a medium—with its mechanisms of fetishistic imaging and magnification, its capacities for experimenting with narrative temporalities, and its methods of conjuring interiorities beyond verbal language—that makes it well-suited for the elaboration of sentimentalism in the late twentieth century?"(24).

The book consists of three sections. The first deals with films "in which the past is imaginatively invoked and idealized" (23): *Temptress Moon* (Chen Kaige, 1996), *Happy Together* (Wong Kar-wai, 1997), *The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou, 1999), *In the Mood for Love* (Wong, 2000). The second covers films that pit "the experience of migrancy . . . against the demands of the traditional kinship family": *Song of the Exile* (Ann Hui, 1990), *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (Peter Ho-sun Chan, 1996), *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (Wayne Wang, 1988), *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993). The third is concerned with films that produce "unconventional affective connections . . . as innovative epistemic possibilities" for otherwise "disenfranchised populations": *Happy Times* (Zhang, 2000), *Not One Less* (Zhang, 1999), *Blind Shaft* (Li Yang, 2003), *The River* (Tsai Ming-liang, 1997).

Drawing from Deleuze, Lacan, Derrida, Pasolini, Bing Xin, Freud, Foucault, and Heidegger, Chow's multidisciplinary method provides an eclectic foundation for her film analyses. For example, her chapter on *Happy Times* and *Not One Less* first combines critiques of orientalism, "initiated theoretically in the West," with Zhang's complex relation to national interests and cultural stereotypes (147). Chow describes China's "rapid transition to market capitalism" as "a vastly duplicitous operation, in which those who perform physical labor will increasingly be consigned to the margins" (157). She finds an equivalent spectacle in the plot of *Happy Times*, in which "well-meaning, kindhearted people . . . are collectively *putting on a show* to appease the downtrodden and powerless" (157). Here, Chow's analysis gains breathtaking momentum; her urgent interpretation of cinematic and cultural production exemplifies the ease with which, throughout the book, she grasps and explains the intersection of politics and aesthetics.

She also emphasizes the significance of stylistic patterns. Chow describes the paradox of *In the Mood for Love* and *Happy Together*'s "visually extravagant" images that become "more colorful and beautiful" in proportion to their revelation of the "capricious . . . human universe that revolves around/behind them" (77). In her analysis of the documentary style and lush visuals of *Happy Together*, Chow equates the former with the "promiscuous lover . . . who pick[s] up things and people ubiquitously and indiscriminately" (61). She contrasts this "casual, flirtatious liaison" with "images that, like the faithful partner, simply keep being there because they are deeply ingrained in memory—and in fantasy" (61). These stylized images (e.g. a lampshade, a waterfall, a tango) "intimate that in the midst of a messy, degenerate relationship . . . some tender moments" gain permanence because "they have not been casually dropped for something more novel or glamorous." Moving from style to ontology, Chow beautifully correlates "sensuous plentitude and spiritual longing" (77).

As is evident in her previous work *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 1995), Chow combines vast resources of literary, psychoanalytic, cultural, gender, and film theory. Perhaps as a consequence of this breadth, chapters unevenly privilege the sentimental, culture, and cinema. Analyses of Zhang and Wong shine, respectively, in their incisive cultural critique and stylistic exegesis; Chow's study of *Song of the Exile* connects cinematic form, "feminine psychic interiority," and temporality (89); through *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *The Wedding Banquet*, she explores home and homecoming relative to "geographical relocation," the "biopolitical imperative to reproduce" (127), and "alternative reproductive arrangements" (142) of family and history. These arguments are often captivating; yet the discussion of Zhang, for example, would benefit from a focused stylistic analysis such as is devoted to Wong's films.

Instead of a comprehensive conclusion, Chow offers a postscript that positions Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as exemplary in elevating compromise and relationality to a level of historical and narrative significance. Despite a disappointing final sentence ("'Sentimental Fabulations': clearly a theme to be continued"), she impressively observes an affective shift from themes of "defiance, rebellion, flight, or absolute departure" to "accommodation, compromise and settlement" (199). Films such as *Love Eterne* (Li Hanxiang,

1963) provide doomed lovers the chance for romantic and rebellious self-assertion, through the "shining path of escape" (198) they discover at the film's end. In contrast to this "courageous folk resistance against an oppressive regime of power," Chow argues that *Brokeback Mountain*—like the other films she studies—"succeeds" because it emphasizes "compromise as an important emotional event" (199). Though she does not satisfyingly fulfill her introductory promise to map out the significance of the sentimental to film theory, her analyses demonstrate the relevance of the "logic and effects" (200) of the sentimental mode to cinema studies. One of the benefits of this book is to expand on questions of the impact cinema has on identity politics and cultural relations. How, for example, can national and ideological concerns combine with aesthetic production/consumption and sentimental yearnings? Chow's reading of Heidegger's writings on "homelessness," for example, establishes a frame through which film-inspired thinking might overtly affect ideas of political empathy that are crucial in contemporary debates over immigration reform and refugee aid.

Sentimental Fabulations convincingly analyzes a national cinema by studying film and culture in relation to themes of finding, creating, returning, and leaving home. Here, Chow presents the sentimental as a lens through which to see what a culture misses and idealizes. Moreover, the sentimental honors the interior (home, family, community) and exterior (world, history—time and place writ large) of both cultural and film worlds.

Through Chow's perspective, the sentimental thus becomes a productive and promising concept for understanding national cinema. © 2008 Kristi McKim

KRISTI MCKIM is an Assistant Professor of Film at Hendrix College.

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

On *The Wire*

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REDRESSING INVISIBILITY

Avant-garde and independent filmmakers have tended to position themselves as unfettered storytellers, freed from the shackles of mainstream corporate studios to craft complicated, ambiguous, and often elusive depictions of reality. In his book, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*, Jeffrey Skoller argues that traditional cinema's approach to historical knowledge resides in the realm of "what can be seen, told, and re-created" (xiv). Most conventional representations of the past resort to realist modes of production in order to lend an air of authority or accuracy to the historical recreation. For alternative filmmakers, however, such approaches are inadequate for "representing the unrepresentable," a now familiar phrase that has emerged from the traumatic historical events of the past two centuries. Skoller explores how avant-garde artists often work within the gaps and fissures of history, the realm of the invisible, to translate the traumas of our recent past. For example, in Ernie Gehr's *Signal—Germany on the Air* (1982–85), as the camera silently meditates on an abandoned lot surrounded by plain, brick buildings, the viewer glimpses a wooden sign that reads: "You are standing on the grounds of the former torture chambers of the Gestapo." Without any narration, Skoller argues, "our senses, out of a desire to create meaning, become sharpened by the absence of specific directions about how to read these scenes." Skoller looks at several other works that address cinema's relationship to historical knowledge: Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) documents the invisible legacy of slavery and *The Man without a World* (1991) by Eleanor Antin, *Urban Peasants* (1975) by Ken Jacobs, and *Cooperation of Parts* (1987) by Daniel Eisenberg explore Jewish culture after the Holocaust, creating a counterstory to totalizing narratives of absolute death and destruction.

In a career that spans more than four decades and eighty films, German director Harun Farocki has experimented with metaphor as a way to represent events emptied of meaning, either through overexposure in the media or a lack of visibility in the public consciousness. Editor Thomas Elsaesser has put together essays and interviews in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines* that document the director's politically engaged cinema. The title of his early film, *Nicht Löschbares Feuer* (*Inextinguishable Fire*) (1969), refers to the napalm used by U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. In a direct address to the audience, Farocki laments the inability of pictures to transmit the searing pain caused by the chemical to the human body: "At first you will close your eyes before the pictures, then you will close your eyes before the memory of the pictures, and then you will close your eyes before the realities the pictures represent" (17). Farocki proceeds to extinguish a cigarette on the back of his forearm; a voiceover explains that a cigarette burns at 500 degrees Celsius, and napalm burns at around 3000 degrees Celsius. For Elsaesser, the scene encapsulates Farocki's preoccupation with the subversive use of images to radically alter perception. The inadequacy of his self-inflicted wound to convey the agony of a body burned by napalm points to the importance of metaphor when, as Elsaesser writes, "trying to bring the unimaginable 'into the picture'" (17).

Artists working in communist countries faced a very rigid set of government-imposed ideological parameters that shaped both form and content. In her autobiography, *Woman with a Movie Camera*, Russian director Marina Goldovskaya recounts her career as a documentary filmmaker during and after the Soviet era, "stifling the desire to tell the truth, not believing in the possibility that the truth could ever be told out loud" (31). Her memoir begins with a childhood spent in the famous House of Filmmakers, surrounded by Russian luminaries like Dziga Vertov, Alexander Medvedkin, and Roman Karmen. She remembers the thrill of experiencing, at the age of sixteen, the passion and emotion of Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), which provided a release from the socialist realism of the Stalin era. Goldovskaya's autobiography is a testament to the perseverance of this independent spirit, as she recounts her attempts to insert humanity and warmth into a cinema whose primary objective was the glorification of the Party. She recalls working on a documentary about the efficiency of a certain collective farm; her inclusion of a long shot of a woman walking in the rain, exhausted after a full day's work, was subversive enough to raise the ire of government censors. After the fall of communism, Goldovskaya was one of the first Russian directors to begin the process of rescuing and remembering a barbarous history that had been erased or rewritten by successive Communist regimes. Her *Solovki Power* (1988), made during Gorbachev's era of perestroika, was the first film to reveal the truth about the forced labor camps of the Soviet Gulag.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 1, pps 102-03, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630. © 2008 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2008.62.1.102

Alanis Obomsawin, a member of the Abenaki tribe, has similarly dedicated herself to the recovery of lost history—in this instance, the lost history of Native Americans. In *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker*, Randolph Lewis presents a compelling overview of one of Canada's most prolific documentary filmmakers. Obomsawin's films reinscribe "what has been erased from the historical record, namely, the agonies of the colonial past and their continuing legacies in the lives of Native people" (80). As Lewis points out, the documentary form becomes a modern-day extension of the Abenaki oral tradition, a way of passing along tribal beliefs and culture. She also aims to educate non-Native audiences about the brutality inflicted on First Nations by the governments of Canada and the United States. In *Our Nationhood* (2004) and *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), she documents the coastal Mi'kmaq tribe's struggle to claim their ancestral land. Storytelling is central to Obomsawin's work, and the filmmaker allows people and communities to narrate their own lives. In *Mother of Many Children* (1977), the role of women in traditional societies is explored in terms of the diversity and commonalities of the lives of Cree, Inuit, Ojibway, I'ilawat, and Mohawk women.

A Critical Cinema 5 is the latest installment of Scott MacDonald's invaluable oral history of independent cinema. The filmmakers who are interviewed recollect a vast array of experiences—encountering a Bolex for the first time (Phil Solomon), working as Adrienne Barbeau's assistant on the set of *Creepshow* (Peggy Ahwesh), marveling at the use of sound in a Marguerite Duras film (Shiho Kano)—what emerges from these interviews is the intensely personal nature of independent filmmaking. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) proclaimed male homosexual desire a year before the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which arguably facilitated the open discussion of homosexuality in America (Kinsey attended the first screening of *Fireworks* and subsequently interviewed Anger). German filmmaker Matthias Müller discusses the increasing social acceptance of homosexuality and his attempts to create a new oppositional space —"a physicality and sexual identity that rejects the norm and even avoids being named"—in his film *Sleepy Haven* (1993). Jennifer Todd Reeves talks about her semi-autobiographical film *Chronic* (1996) as a means of understanding her teenage struggle with self-mutilation; Peggy Ahwesh addresses the taboo subject of childhood sexuality in *Martina's Playhouse* (1989); and James Benning describes his motorcycle trip across the United States, documented in *North on Evers* (1991), as way of connecting geographic space with his personal past.

Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film and Video 1913–2006 takes its title from the 2005 Experimenta festival in Bombay, curated by Amrit Gangar. Searching for a less militaristic term than "avant-garde" to describe Indian alternative cinema, Gangar proposed the polyvalent Sanskrit word "prayoga," which conveys a sense of beginning, uniting, combining, touching, concentrating, and contemplating. Members of Raqs Media Collective, based in Delhi, film the streets of the city. As Shuddhabrata Sengupta explains, the group views time and space as palimpsest of history, like the layers upon layers of advertising posters that stick to each other on the walls of Delhi. In his essay on video art, author Johan Pijnappel notes the female directors who have defied Indian social taboos and government censorship. Tejal Shah's *Stinging Kiss* (2000) subverts the conservative sexual mores of Bollywood by introducing cross-dressing and overt sexuality into the chaste romanticism of traditional Indian film. Nalini Malani's video installation, "Remembering Toba Tek Singh" (1999), critiqued the government's testing of nuclear weapons on May 11, 1998. In the spirit of making visible what has tragically been forgotten, Malani reminds the viewer that this day is also, ironically, the birthday of Gautama Buddha. Her message, that the country seemed to have forgotten its tradition of nonviolence in the wake of the violent partitioning of the country in 1947, has lost none of its relevance and immediacy today.

BOOK DATA

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BETH MAULDIN teaches French at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia.